The Right Thing To Do

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The Right Thing To Do

by LovesBitca8

Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Notes

First story! Hope you all like it.

No infringement intended.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 【授权翻译】正义为名，抚错之殇——The Right Thing To Do, All the Wrong Things by Cindyrainyday
- Translation into Polski available: Słuszny wybór by Vera_Verto
- Translation into Français available: [Traduction]La bonne décision (The right thing to do) by Alcy

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

2021 UPDATE:

Welcome to the first fic in the Rights and Wrongs universe, and my first ever fic. 🥰 I hope you enjoy, and if you do, be sure to check out the next two fics in this universe: All the Wrong Things (Draco's companion piece to The Right Thing To Do), and The Auction (a dark AU of this timeline where Voldemort Wins).

I get a lot of questions and comments about this, so just a heads up to pay attention to the "Secret Feelings" tag. That's a key trope in this fic, so if it's not for you, no worries.

See you on the other side. ❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione regretted her choice of shoes now. She'd picked "sensible heels," as Ginny would call them. "Sensible" only meant that they were not too high as to topple her. And that they were ugly. She realized this when she discovered that her shoes matched perfectly with the stale, dusty floors of the underground Ministry halls.

"Hermione."

She looked up from her shoes to see Harry walking toward her.

"Harry. How was it? Did they – Do you think --?"

"It's hard to tell." He pushed his hair away from his forehead, looking down the hall at the oaken doors he came from. "They have a lot of evidence, obviously. They asked a lot of questions about fifth year and Umbridge, but I tried to give them the details about – about –"

Harry stuttered, and Hermione watched his eyes glaze as he looked away from her. It had only been a year and a half, so she understood his hesitance.

"Malfoy Manor," she finished for him.

"Yeah." Harry swallowed, and Hermione saw him holding Dobby on the beach as if it were yesterday. "But they wouldn't let me say much," he continued. "They had my testimony about the night Dumbledore died –" Harry blinked again, almost a twitch she realized "—but I tried to amend it to include *him* more. They wouldn't let me. Said it was already 'in the file.'"

Hermione nodded, looking behind him at the double doors. She could feel her heartbeat in her ears.

“He’s in there,” Harry said.

Hermione snapped her eyes to his green ones. Harry’s drilled into hers, searching for… something.

“Right. I mean, of course he is. It’s his trial.” She held her breath.

“He’s not making it easy on them, I don’t think.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he doesn’t.… He doesn’t seem like he’s fighting it very hard. He looks bored almost.”

Hermione looked back to the doors behind Harry, nodding.

“And he looks…” Harry stopped himself. “I guess you’ll see.”

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She *would* see. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn’t meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

“I’ll be here for you when you come out.”

Hermione looked at Harry again. “Oh, Harry, no. You’ve done enough. I know you have to get back upstairs.”

“Are you sure?” And there he was again, searching for something.

“Yes, absolutely.” She pasted a smile on her face and squeezed his arm. “I’ll come find you upstairs when I’m done. Maybe we can go to lunch?”

“That would be great.” He smiled at her.

Harry turned and began the long walk back to the lifts. Hermione called after him, “Harry!” He turned to her. “Thank you,” she said. “I know you were… hesitant –“

“No, you were right, Hermione,” he said. “It’s the right thing to do.” He turned and continued.

Hermione listened to his footsteps retreat down the hall. A different echo than his trainers used to make. Hermione smiled, thinking of the change. Dragon leather dress shoes were expected in certain situations she supposed, namely a Wizengamot trial, but she’d seen Harry wear these and other fancier shoes more and more often. That could be expected from The-

Boy-Who-Lived-and-Died-and-Lived-Again, as Rita Skeeter so artfully, and concisely, named Harry in her articles. The requests for his public appearances were increasing, and his celebrity was doing anything but *de*creasing. He attended galas, organized remembrances for past Order members, opened orphanages for those children who had lost their families. Hermione had her own fair share of galas and public events, but she was only requested if Harry could attend, and sometimes only if Ron could round out the trio, which was made more difficult these days while Ron was off playing Quidditch for the Irish.

The oak door opened. A small, round man squeezed out. He would have reminded her of Umbridge if he hadn't been smiling at her. An odd thing to do during a trial.

"Miss Hermione Granger?" He made a little show of looking around the empty hallway before his eyes landed on her. "Miss Granger, they are ready for you."

Hermione nodded her head, smoothed out her robes, and began her very sensible walk to the doors. She nervously pushed her hair back behind her ears, something she never did. So she pulled it back over her ears. As she reached the small man he smiled at her and began the speech that she had heard at least four times over the past eighteen months for different trials she had been summoned for. *No contact with the accused. Confiscation of wand. Wandless magic subject to imprisonment.* Her eyes flittered over his shoulder, past the door that he held open, but all she could see at this angle was the rows of purple robes. She handed over her wand to him, and he escorted her in.

Even though she had been in the Wizengamot dungeons several times since, it still surprised her to not feel the cold of the Dementors that she expected ever since their Ministry break-in last year. The Dementors had been excused of their service after the fall of Voldemort. No, she felt a different kind of cold.

She rounded the entrance and did her best not to look in the direction of the cage she knew would be fifteen feet to her right. She stepped up to the small platform and placed her hands on the rail in front of her.

"State your name." A voice rang from somewhere in the sea of purple.

"Hermione Jean Granger." She felt, more than heard, a movement to her right. It was him. She focused on the grey-haired individuals in purple.

"Hermione Jean Granger. You are here of your own free will. You have not been summoned in defense of the accused. Is this correct?"

Her breath caught in her throat. "Yes. That is correct."

Another voice from the purple: "You are here to offer information that you hope will assist the Wizengamot in determining the sentencing of Draco Lucius Malfoy. Is that correct?"

"Yes." Her voice was softer than before. She would need to start breathing soon, she supposed.

“Please proceed Miss Granger.”

Breathing in, gripping the railing, she let the practiced story flow through her.

“On March 30, 1998, Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley and I were caught by Snatchers and taken to Malfoy Manor. I was able to cast a Stinging Jinx on Harry Potter just before capture, in the hopes that his face would be unrecognizable. No enchantments were placed on Ron Weasley or myself.

“We were taken to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.” Hermione’s hands tightened on the rails. “They wanted to be sure they had Harry Potter before contacting Voldemort.” She heard a small intake of breath, no doubt from some purple robe who still would not say the name out loud. “Mrs. Malfoy called for her son, a schoolmate of Harry Potter’s, to identify him. Draco Malfoy refused to make a positive identification, thereby buying us time to escape. If he had identified Harry Potter, I believe that Voldemort would have been summoned, and Harry Potter would have died that night, thus ending the Second Wizarding War. By choosing not to identify Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy saved us all.”

A silence fell over the wide room. Hermione wondered if maybe she should go on.

“Miss Granger,” a redheaded woman in the second row called to her. “You say Draco Malfoy *chose* not to identify Mr. Potter. What grounds do you have on that?”

Hermione furrowed her brows before proceeding. “Like I said, he was presented with Harry Potter and said he could not identify him –“

“Did you not place a Stinging Jinx on Mr. Potter?” The redhead cut her off. “For the direct purpose of making him unidentifiable?”

Hermione could feel heat rising in her cheeks. “Even if Malfoy could not identify Harry Potter, a schoolmate that he’d known for more than six years, he could see that the person’s companions were Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. He did not positively identify either of us.”

“Do you think Mr. Malfoy would be able to identify yourself and Mr. Weasley?” A gray-haired man in the front asked.

“Yes. We went to school with him for six years as well.” Hermione thought her answer might have been a bit swotty….

“Did you have a relationship with Mr. Malfoy at Hogwarts?” The redhead.

Her cheeks burned at the insinuation that was probably not an insinuation at all. She responded, “We were classmates.”

“You were not friends, though?” The redhead prodded.

“No.”

“In fact,” the redhead continued, “was he not somewhat antagonistic to you at school, due to your blood status?”

Hermione almost snorted, but guessed that it would not help the situation. “’Somewhat,’ I suppose. But I hardly think schoolyard bullying should be examined in this sort of situation.”

“What do you think should be examined, Miss Granger?” A blonde woman from the fourth row asked. She smiled with a warmth that reminded Hermione of Molly Weasley.

“I think his character should be examined. I believe his mother, Narcissa Malfoy, was given a full pardon a year ago due to her ‘assistance with the Battle of Hogwarts.’ I believe I have just presented a moment that his assistance was necessary. I think I could give you several other citations and moments where his actions spoke not of a Death Eater, but of a son and a child. I think Mr. Malfoy’s crimes should be expunged and a full pardon given.”

And with that final dot at the end of the sentence, she heard tuttering from the stands, an indignant gasp from the corner, and a chuckle to her right. She knew that chuckle. She’d heard it growing up. She couldn’t stop herself in that moment. She looked at him.

He was pale. Unusually pale. His hair hadn’t been cut, and if she thought about it, his hair had been long at the battle, curling behind his ears. Now it was growing to the nape of his neck, shaggy, and less pristinely blonde than usual. His eyes drilled into hers. He was leaning back against the bars of the cage. No chair or stool were provided for the accused in the cage, but instead of standing and grasping the bars like so many had before him, he leaned back, crossing his legs and arms. Waiting to be entertained. And she had entertained him. Her heart beat faster and her cheeks warmed.

“Miss Granger.” Hermione regained her focus on the blonde Molly Weasley. “After years of prejudice and ‘schoolyard bullying,’ as you say. After being tortured by his aunt on his drawing room floor, do you feel you are best suited to speak on behalf of his character?”

Hermione glanced at all the faces staring at her, except for one. The redhead wore a smug grin.

“You’re right,” Hermione said. “Those aspects don’t qualify me. What qualifies me is that I am human and I see room for forgiveness. I am Hermione Granger, war heroine, brightest witch of our age, and one-third of your Golden Trio. And these facts alone should exclude me from being questioned about my qualifications, just as I assume Harry Potter’s qualifications were not questioned.”

The room went still. She had never been more arrogant in her life, she realized, but her blood pressure was rising.

“And as Hermione Granger, I request that the actions of a 17-year-old wizard, raised in a blood purity household, whose parents, family, and friends all supported the Dark Lord, and whose life was being threatened daily, be excused of his actions.” Hermione tried to stop herself but couldn’t. “Draco Malfoy did not kill Albus Dumbledore. He did not kill anyone.

So, I do not see why he is being tried in full Wizengamot as if he is a murderer and a staunch supporter of the Dark Lord. Just because his name is Malfoy does not mean you can place the sins of the war on his shoulders."

The redhead pursed her lips and looked away. The blonde Molly Weasley gave the floor a sheepish smile. The gray-haired man in the front stood.

"Miss Granger," he said, "Thank you for coming in today. We will examine your testimony and the testimony of others." He had kind eyes, but Hermione still felt like she'd overstayed her welcome.

"Thank you to the honored members of the Wizengamot for letting me speak." Hermione released the railings in front of her, letting blood flow to her fingers for the first time in ten minutes. As she turned to leave she couldn't help herself. She glanced at him again.

The slightly amused smirk was gone. He was glaring at her. Examining her like she was a flobberworm found under his shoe. Like she hadn't just tried to save his life. Hermione found her breath and continued out of the room, blood pounding.

Her ridiculous heels clicked against the stones as she made her way out, passing the door guard, continuing to the lifts and ignoring him as he called after her to give her back her wand.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Thanks for reading so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione got all the way back to her desk without breathing. At least it felt that way. The logical part of her brain – her whole brain – knew that she must have been breathing the whole time, but she was gasping by the time she'd reached Level 4.

She sat at her desk for several minutes, waiting for her blood to slow, and it wasn't until then that she'd realized she left her wand downstairs. She closed her eyes and pushed on her temples. How idiotic.

"Granger."

Hermione released her temples to see her coworker, Aiden O'Connor, standing at the corner of her cubicle, eating a banana. What a foul thing to do.

"You had your Wizengamot thing this morning, yeah?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "How'd it go? Is the git getting the Kiss?" He smiled at her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Actually, Aiden, I volunteered to testify on his behalf."

The banana stopped halfway to his mouth. His jaw went slack for a moment. "Is that right? Apologies. I thought the two of you didn't get on."

Aiden was one year behind her at Hogwarts. He was also in Gryffindor, so she assumed he had seen enough of Malfoy's and her interactions over the years to support that idea.

“We didn’t. It just – It was the right thing to do. Not every mistake deserves a life sentence in Azkaban.”

Aiden’s eyebrows lifted and the corners of his mouth turned downwards. She assumed this meant “Meh! You’re right!” but she couldn’t be sure because the smell of banana was engulfing her.

“So magnanimous. But I guess that’s to be expected of the ‘Golden Girl.’” He grinned at her and started to walk away. “Oh, Mathilda wants those notes on the Welsh Green egg this afternoon if you can.”

“Of course. Thank you, Aiden.” Hermione watched him leave, scowling.

He knew she hated the terms “Golden Girl” and “Golden Trio” and that is why he used them so often. When she interviewed at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures two months ago, she had submitted her resume under a false name. When Mathilda Grimblehawk saw Hermione Granger walk into her office, she flipped her tea over all the papers on her desk and asked Hermione if there was anything she could do for her. Hermione insisted that she be given no partial treatment simply because she was a war heroine, and insisted on starting at an entry level position and working her way up through the Ministry. Even though the Office for House-Elf Relocation was her main goal, she had been assigned into the Beast division of the Department. Hermione was determined to move within departments and up the ladder based on merits and talents alone, not on her fame.

Ron had done the exact opposite, flaunting his status in articles for the Prophet. About a month after the Battle of Hogwarts Rita Skeeter asked him what he’d like to do next, and when he said he wanted to play Quidditch for the best team to have him, the offers poured in for weeks. He’d been gone for almost a year in Ireland, coming by only once a month or so to visit. He never brought home any of the girls he’d been dating, but Hermione had seen them pictured together. Molly Weasley was blind to all this, of course, insisting that Hermione should join Arthur and her for a visit to Ireland. A year ago, when Hermione was headed back to Hogwarts for her “eighth year” and Ron was headed to Ireland, she told him they should take this time apart and keep their options open. She didn’t mean *that* open.

Harry had fallen somewhere in the middle. No stranger to fame and Rita Skeeter’s probing articles, he was almost comfortable as the center of the wizarding world. He had gladly accepted a position as an Auror last summer, despite not having taken his N.E.W.T. exams. His only saving grace was Ginny, who didn’t much care for the spotlight. Hermione and Ginny had gotten close after sharing dorms for their last year of Hogwarts, as Hermione had been the only Gryffindor “eighth year” girl to come back to school. They’d rented a flat after Molly had promptly forbid Ginny and Harry from moving in together upon Ginny’s graduation. Ginny generally spent the evenings and nights at Harry’s, but Hermione got to see her often enough.

Hermione looked at the clock. Quarter ‘til noon. She needed to retrieve her wand, but she didn’t want a chance encounter with any of the Wizengamot as they dismissed for lunch. Or worse than that: a chance encounter with the prisoner as he was moved for the lunch break.

Hermione shivered at the memory of his condescending glare as she left the courtroom. It was right that nothing had changed, she had to remind herself. Why would he look at her any other way?

Ginny had labeled him Hermione's Charity Case, but Hermione knew that Ginny was wiser than that. She was very kind to not push the issue, but from the careful way that Harry treated her this morning, she assumed Ginny had told him something.

"So you have a soft spot for Draco Malfoy," Ginny had told her one day last spring in their dorm rooms at Hogwarts. Ginny had shrugged. "So what?"

"I do not have a soft spot for him," Hermione had blushed.

"Fine," Ginny said. "You have a debilitating infatuation with him."

"Ginny!" Hermione had closed her book and turned to face the ginger. "That's wildly … inappropriate and inaccurate."

Ginny leveled a stare at her. "Listen up, Granger," Ginny said, a favorite phrase of hers. "Here's what I know. Today's Daily Prophet had two featured articles. One about my brother and his triumph against the Bulgarians, accompanied by a very *informative* picture of Ron and a blonde at the post-game celebration, and another article about the setting of Draco Malfoy's hearing date. Guess which article you read five times."

Hermione grinned triumphantly. "Ginny, why would I *want* to read about Ron and his new girlfriend? *Or* about Ron and Quidditch? Sounds like two topics I want nothing to do with."

"But you do want to know everything about Malfoy's trial and his charges?"

"I – I think… I mean it's more interesting than Quidditch and blonde dim-wits, that's for certain."

Ginny smiled at her as if she still didn't believe her. "Okay. I get it."

She'd dropped the subject that evening, but every time she could, she'd bring up Malfoy. She'd leave Prophet clippings on Hermione's breakfast plate in the mornings. She'd play devil's advocate whenever groups discussed the Malfoy family. She would never join the hushed gossip in the halls, and she always quit her teasing when it looked like Hermione could take no more.

One night last April, with the four-poster curtains drawn closed and the sounds of the other girls falling off to sleep, Hermione heard Ginny's voice whisper over to her.

"How long have you been working on your Charity Case, Hermione?"

Hermione's voice caught in her throat but she still was able to respond, "Since 3rd year."

There was silence. And then she heard Ginny turn over to go to sleep. She had wanted to

whisper to her that it was nothing and she needn't be worried about her. She had wanted Ginny to turn over and ask her every question that she didn't have the answer to. But more that this she had wanted Ginny to drop it and never speak of it again.

The sound of Mathilda's heels clacking against the floor brought Hermione back to her cubicle. Mathilda didn't need sensible heels. She could walk very easily in outrageous heels. Hermione had two seconds to act busy before Mathilda walked past her.

"Hermione! Taxing day so far?"

Hermione turned to see Mathilda towering over her, giving her a bright smile.

"Definitely, yes." Hermione smiled.

Mathilda nodded. "Well, don't skip lunch again. Make sure to take your breaks when they're due."

"Thank you, yes. And I will have those notes on the Common Welsh Green egg by three."

"Oh, by the end of the day is fine." She waved the air and smiled, turning to go.

Hermione turned back to her desk. She inked her quill and began to finish her notes on the egg found in Knockturn Alley last week. She reached for her wand to summon the report, and huffed when she remembered she still needed to go downstairs.

She ran into Harry at the Level 4 lifts. Her anxiety spiked. He never came to her floor.

"There you are," he said.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"Nothing," he said, taken aback. "I thought I was going to meet you for lunch?"

Hermione remembered now. "Oh, yes. I'm sorry, I forgot. I actually need to – to run an errand. Can we go tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is Saturday."

Hermione closed her eyes and pressed her temples. "Right. Sorry."

"What errand do you need to run?" Harry asked. Hermione hesitated.

"I… I left my wand downstairs." She pursed her lips and looked away.

"Oh," Harry said. "That's rather odd of you." He laughed.

"I know. I'm mortified."

“I’ll come with you.”

“Oh, Harry, you don’t have to spend your entire lunch running around the Ministry with me.”

Harry shrugged and called for the lift. “What else am I going to do? Besides, the café is on the way!” He smiled brightly at her. “You can finally try the croissants I’ve been raving about.”

Hermione smiled and followed him into the lift. They chatted about work and Hermione found herself thanking Merlin for Harry. She, of course, had done this many times over the past eight years, but as the lift filled with wizards and witches from other departments who openly stared at Harry Potter sharing a lift with them, he continued to speak only to her, completely oblivious to his effect on the world around him.

Harry led the way down the hall toward the Oak doors she'd come flying through not an hour ago. She was mortified to knock just to speak with the round man who had her wand, but Harry must have sensed this because he did it for her. Hermione sighed.

The man poked his head out. "Oh Miss Granger! I was looking for you!"

"Er, yes I'm sorry I was in a bit of a rush --"

"I have your wand!"

"I-- yes I know. I'm here to retrieve it from you."

"Wonderful!" he squeaked. He stepped through the door and let it close to a crack behind him. Hermione could hear the murmuring of the Wizengamot and a lazy drawl she would recognize for the rest of her life.

He conjured a form for her to sign, allowing him to release her wand to him. Once signed, he produced her wand from his robes pocket. She felt complete again.

He piped in things like "have a nice day" and "be sure to hang onto that!", but Hermione was listening to the clamoring that had started behind him. Voices rising and arguing. One that sounded like the grey-haired man was yelling for peace. The door clicked shut behind the round man and there was silence. Hermione stared at the doors, willing them to crack open.

"You ready?" Harry's voice shocked her. She had forgotten about him.

"Yes, absolutely," she croaked. "Lunch?"

They turned to walk down the long corridor just as the lifts were arriving.

Even from twenty meters away, Hermione could recognize Narcissa Malfoy's long, white form. Her shoes clicked as she exited the lifts in short staccato rhythms. Her robes were pristine and white, draping her figure perfectly. The odd look about her as if she'd smelled something foul had been replaced since the final battle with simple arrogance, less identified

than before. She looked the perfect picture of a freed woman.

"Mrs. Malfoy," Harry said as they got closer, extending his hand. "Good afternoon."

"Mr. Potter." Her voice was like honey, but even more surprising was the smile she graced him with, as if they were old friends. Hermione had to remind herself that Harry had spoken at her own trial last summer, assisting to clear her charges. "I heard you testified today. I can't thank you enough."

"Actually," Harry said. He smoothed his hair down. "Hermione really convinced me to elaborate on my previous statements. She testified today too." Harry turned to face her, but Hermione was frozen in place as Narcissa Malfoy turned her blue eyes on her. She blinked, as if seeing her for the first time.

"Miss Granger." Narcissa extended her hand. "I almost didn't recognize you." Hermione couldn't understand why. She hadn't changed a bit. "I thank you deeply for speaking today."

Hermione's arm moved on its own and suddenly she was clasping hands with Narcissa Malfoy.

"Not at all Mrs. Malfoy. It - it was the right thing to do," she said. "He was very brave during the war."

Narcissa's eyes roved over her face and in that moment Hermione knew that she had failed at her attempt at nonchalance. Narcissa Malfoy knew. It was not Legilimency. But she knew. Narcissa released her hand.

"Yes, it was a trying time for the full family." She sighed and looked toward the doors. "Well, they are letting me have lunch with Draco today. I would offer for you to join us, but I'm sure they wouldn't allow that."

Hermione's blood pressure skyrocketed at the thought of having lunch with Harry, Draco, and Narcissa Malfoy. What would the four of them even discuss?

Harry jumped in. "Of course. It was nice to see you Mrs. Malfoy."

"You as well Mr. Potter. And Miss Granger," Narcissa said, turning her eyes on her, searching for something in her face again. "Do keep in touch."

Hermione's tongue was too dry to respond, so she simply smiled and nodded. Keep in touch?

She watched Narcissa glide away. Harry had to tug at her arm to get her to walk with him to the lifts. She felt foggy.

"'He was very brave in the war?'" Harry raised an eyebrow at her. She could see the smile lifting his cheeks.

"Shut up." Hermione blushed and Harry laughed.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> “DRACO MALFOY: A FREED MAN”
> by Rita Skeeter
>
> *How does a Death Eater possibly redeem himself? In the wake of the Second Wizarding War, Draco Malfoy was asked this exact question. After over a year in Azkaban, awaiting trial like the other captured Death Eaters, Draco Malfoy's trial began this past Wednesday August 25, ending two days later.*
>
> *It is unknown what the conditions of his release are. Is he to be kept under house arrest? Did he have to provide valuable information to the Wizengamot on other Death Eaters? Were his family assets seized in war reparations?*
>
> *Stick with this reporter, and you will know all soon enough.*
>
> Hermione rolled her eyes and bit into her toast. She had skimmed the beginning of the article a moment before and was just now re-reading it. She had jumped through it, landing on things like "Harry Potter and war heroine Hermione Granger testifying on his behalf."
>
> She was quite surprised at how factual the article was, given its author. The picture they chose of Draco was from after the trial she assumed, because his hair had been given a wash. It was almost as if he had stood for a photoshoot.
>
> Normally, any photo or article that involved Draco Malfoy was stuck to her ceiling in the morning, but Ginny usually slept quite late on the weekends. She had been recruited for the Holyhead Harpies on their second string and had practice early mornings Monday through Friday, so she took her rest when she could.
>
> Hermione had not at all expected there to be news a day after the trial, so when she had grabbed the *Prophet* to tuck into her bag, she had spent several precious minutes scanning.

Hermione checked the clock. She was almost late for her weekend job at Cornerstone Bookshop, a quaint little store in Diagon Alley. She worked from ten in the morning until six in the evening on Saturdays and Sundays, a part of her life that Harry, Ron, and Ginny didn't quite understand.

"Why do you want to work on the weekends?" Ron had asked when he was visiting for Harry's birthday in July. "When will you sleep or have a social life?"

"Not all of us need to sleep until two in the afternoon, Ronald," was her response.

Besides, Hermione soon realized upon graduating Hogwarts that she *had* no social life. The first months of living with Ginny felt just like the dorms, but she slowly felt out of place at times when Harry would join them. She found that she couldn't just replace one Weasley with another. She'd always felt left out of Ron and Harry's dynamic, but she knew she was necessary, wanted. There were always going to be times in Ginny and Harry's relationship where Hermione was not necessary.

By mid-June she had applied for a few positions to keep her busy on the weekends, seeing as she had no homework to do on Saturday nights anymore. Morty, the owner of Cornerstone Books, interviewed her like a normal human, instead of the "Golden Girl," so she was immediately endeared to him.

Hermione folded up the newspaper, grabbed her jacket and headed out the door to the local apparition point. She could re-read while the shop was slow, which it usually was.

She apparated into Diagon Alley near Florean Fortescue's at 9:25AM on the dot, like she did every Saturday. A bulb went off to her right, like it did every Saturday. A voice called "Miss Granger! Over here! What are you doing this weekend?" like it did every Saturday.

Hermione had turned and smiled and responded for the first month, thinking it rather odd that the answer "Oh, nothing really. Just working and reading" was worth a follow up interview the next weekend. In August she'd stopped responding, and just turned and smiled. Now she did not even turn.

She passed the familiar store fronts and came to the corner of Diagon Alley and Horizont Alley. She released the enchantments that Morty had placed the previous evening and opened up. It was a tiny store, but thousands of books were crammed in. It didn't get nearly as busy as Flourish and Blotts, but Hermione liked the quiet. She had half an hour of organizing, bookkeeping, and sorting before the first customers arrived.

Hermione opened the *Prophet* on the counter and started pulling the shop's financial ledger out from the cabinet below. She placed the most recent letter from Australia next to the paper, intending to respond to her "penpal" Monica Wilkins today. Hopefully she could squeeze in how much she would love a visit to Australia, and maybe she could see them while she was there, without sounding too forced.

Hermione combed through the article several times, looking for more information. Was he already released? Would he be staying at the Manor with Narcissa? Any news of Lucius?

The Malfoys and other accused Death Eaters had been rounded up last summer about a month after the Final Battle. Once the Ministry had gotten its legs and Kingsley had been appointed as Minister, the hunt began. All suspected Death Eaters were tossed into Azkaban to await trial. Harry, Ron and Hermione had all given a full week's long testimony to the Wizengamot last summer to help identify and rank the accused in order of most dangerous. Harry had fought for Narcissa Malfoy to be given trial immediately, as he could provide evidence of her innocence and aid during the Battle of Hogwarts. Hermione found his vehemence for Narcissa's safety strange, but she guessed she couldn't really comment on how odd it was to move heaven and earth to save a Malfoy.

Unfortunately, the Wizengamot members with an axe to grind against the Malfoy family decided to take Narcissa Malfoy's release as a defeat, and quickly brought Lucius Malfoy to trial. He was sentenced for twenty years, but was already negotiating for his time to be cut in half. Draco on the other hand had awaited trial for over a year, as a punishment. Many of the Wizengamot had worked closely with Dumbledore while he was Chief Warlock, and felt that Draco should be responsible for his actions.

Hermione jumped when the front door opened for the first customer at five minutes past ten. The shop remained quiet throughout the morning until around midday when Ginny flew into Cornerstone like a tornado.

"Ya know, I leave articles for you every morning," she yelled from the doorway, hands on her hips. Hermione winced at the sound.

"Yes?" Hermione said, at a normal level of voice.

Ginny must have realized how inappropriate her volume was, because she looked around and ran up the two steps to the main landing. She flattened her hands on the counter in front of Hermione.

"I leave articles for you every morning. *Interesting* articles. And then today the *most interesting* article in the past few months has disappeared by the time I wake up."

Hermione smiled and tossed the paper to Ginny.

"Oh, I've already seen it!" She shoved the paper back towards Hermione. "I heard all about it at Harry's."

"Well, I'm sorry, Ginny." Hermione put the financial ledger away. "I thought you might have already read it."

"If I'd seen it, it would have been floating above your head on the ceiling for when you woke up. Because that's the kind of friend I am."

Hermione laughed. Ginny loved to play the fiery redhead even when she wasn't actually angry. Harry had a hard time telling the moments apart.

"Yes, you are an excellent friend, Ginny."

“And because I’m such an excellent friend, I raced down here to tell you what the paper didn’t.”

Hermione’s hands stopped flipping through the mail. Ginny had a smug look on her face.

“Yes?” Hermione said. She was very still.

“Harry had a Floo call this morning.” Ginny smiled and lowered her voice. “Malfoy goes to work for the Ministry in two weeks.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. She stepped into Ginny and looked at the stacks to the left to see if there were any eavesdropping customers.

“As what? What department?”

“As an informant. In the Auror Department.”

“An informant?” Hermione’s eyebrows were at her hairline. “You mean--?”

“This is not public knowledge, Granger,” Ginny said. “But apparently, it was his idea.” Ginny grabbed a mint from the bowl on the counter and began unwrapping it. “Right before they went to lunch yesterday, Draco asked to take the floor and suggested that he be released on a probation, claiming that he could be ‘essential’ in assisting the Auror Department round up the remaining Death Eaters and locating dark objects, hidden passageways, all of that.”

Hermione just stared at her. Ginny smirked back.

“You did it, Hermione.”

Hermione straightened.

“I-I did nothing,” she said. “It sounds like he negotiated his case perfectly fine – “

“Yes, but *after* you came in on your white unicorn. The ‘Golden Girl’ must be listened to!” Ginny pounded her fist on the counter with theatrics that reminded her of a pair of twin redheads.

Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed several slips of reserved requests for her to pull off the shelves and file behind the counter. She headed to the small alcove of shelves to the left of the entrance and Ginny followed.

“So,” Ginny said. “You didn’t tell me how it went yesterday at the trial. Do you think he’ll be sending you a thank you card or will he be dropping by in person?”

“Neither, I’m sure.” Hermione pulled a tome off the bottom shelf and heaved it into her arms. “He was not at all thrilled to see me.”

“It must be difficult to see you again, I’m sure.” Ginny sang. Hermione knew what was coming next. “After all the last time he saw you was… you know…”

Ginny always played this game. She let her sentences fade away when talking about Draco so that Hermione could correct her or fill in the gaps. It was her way of digging for information.

“The last time he saw me was probably the Final Battle, Ginny,” Hermione said. She walked a circle around Ginny to get to the stacks behind her.

“Oh, right, right,” Ginny said. “But then before that was the… you know….”

“The Room of Requirement battle, you mean?” Hermione smirked at her, not playing her game.

“Of course. But I’m talking about the last meaningful conversation you had. Which was…”

“Oh *that* meaningful conversation. You must mean second year on the Quidditch pitch when he called me a Mudblood,” Hermione said with a neutral face. She summoned the bookcase ladder.

“Yes, as sentimental as that time was, I’m sure there were meaningful conversations after that, like…”

“When I slapped him in third year?”

“Right, and then…?”

“When he spread lies about me and Harry for Rita Skeeter to publish?”

“Foreplay.” Ginny waved her hand away. Hermione chuckled and began climbing the ladder to get to the top shelf. Ginny continued, “I’m talking about that meaningful conversation you had a little later, maybe sixth year? When was it?”

“You must mean the conversation we had about how to fix a vanishing cabinet, yes?” Hermione smiled down at her from the second rung. Ginny frowned up at her. “We haven’t *had* a meaningful conversation, Gin.”

“Then maybe I’m getting it confused with… you know…”

“When he let Death Eaters into the castle?” Hermione realized that she wasn’t entirely sure they were alone in the shop, and she should probably keep her voice to a minimum level while playing this game. She looked down to see Ginny scrunching her face at her.

“Merlin, Granger. *Why* do you love him?” Ginny stopped playing for a moment and shook her head. Hermione’s blood pounded at the “L” word. Ginny continued, “Alright, so maybe I’m trying to remember that one story you told me… you know…”

“And which story is that Ginny?” Hermione reached the top shelf and found the place empty where the book should be. She frowned.

“The story about… let’s see… the last clandestine meeting you had?”

Hermione laughed. “Oh, the *clandestine* meeting. Of course.” Hermione stepped down one rung to see if the book was misplaced on the shelf below.

“You know, one of the many steamy nights between the two of you,” Ginny said from the ground.

“None of those are coming to mind, really. Can you be more specific, Gin?”

“Maybe I’m thinking of the last time he kissed you? When was that again?”

The book wasn’t misplaced there either. It wasn’t on yesterday’s ledger, so she knew it was still in the shop. Hermione placed her hands on her hips and searched the rows. She thought maybe it had a grey spine.

“Oh, the last time he kissed me. Let me conjure that memory. Please hold.” Hermione responded, eyes not leaving the stacks.

“Or was it the *first* time he kissed you? Maybe that’s the story I’m thinking of…”

Hermione looked down at Ginny. Her face was bright and open, waiting. Somehow Hermione had missed the moment a few questions back when Ginny had stopped teasing and started actually asking her. She was honestly looking for an answer to one of her idiotic questions. How strange that she assumed…

“Ginny,” Hermione said. She descended a few rungs of the ladder. “He doesn’t…. I mean,” Hermione cleared her throat. “We didn’t have a relationship. There were no clandestine meetings. I thought you knew.”

Ginny searched her eyes. “And there was no snogging after classes either, then?”

“There was no snogging, period.” Hermione stepped off the ladder. “We didn’t… he didn’t have any sort of feelings for me.

“You don’t necessarily need to have feelings for someone to toss them into a broom closet after hours and snog them senseless.” Ginny wiggled her brows.

“Snogging in a broom closet? Seriously, Ginny. Who does that?”

Ginny laughed. “Hermione! Everyone did!”

Hermione blushed. She felt very stupid, which was her least favorite feeling in the world. “Well, not everyone, I guess.” Hermione turned away from her to move the ladder down to another column to look for that book.

“Hermione, I’m sorry.” Ginny followed her. “I didn’t mean to laugh at you.”

“You know very well that no one has ever shoved me into a broom closet.” Hermione stabilized the ladder. Ginny was the only person Hermione ever got to talk about relationships and sex with. Or, more accurately, her lack of both.

“Not even Draco Malfoy.” Ginny said, almost asking.

“Not even Draco Malfoy.” Hermione confirmed. She started climbing. “I’m sorry I can’t give you more interesting information.”

“I just wish I could understand why you like him.” Ginny’s voice seemed so small from the ground.

Hermione spotted a grey spine several columns away, but she couldn’t even revel in that victory.

“Me too,” she said.

It did seem rather silly when Ginny laid it out for her. They had never kissed or made eyes at each other, or even had a conversation that didn’t end in wand work. He had never given her any reason to believe he may feel the same way, but still she felt *some* way for him. And there was no way he could have known that.

There were little moments that she could cling to, moments she could smile at or moments that could keep her up at night. There was the way the light streaming from the window in McGonagall’s classroom would hit him just right for seven minutes or so during the spring of their fifth year. From her position a row behind and several over, she was able to watch and wait for it. He would always get warm in that class too, being so close to the window, so she sometimes got to watch him shed his outer robes during class. Thankfully McGonagall trusted that she was always paying close attention and never asked her to repeat the lesson during those seven minutes.

There was the Yule Ball in Fourth Year when she had practiced several dances to be on the arm of a Tri-Wizard Tournament Champion, only to realize that Viktor couldn’t lead her around the room any better than she could remember the steps. During the French Waltz, a clear homage to their guests from Beauxbatons, the partners would split and turn to the couple on either side of them to bow and curtsey, turning around them before returning to their original partner. Hermione had never practiced with other dancers, so when she turned to find herself face-to-face with Draco Malfoy when the partners split, she stopped breathing. Draco pursed his lips at her, but then bowed first, as custom in the dance. She watched his back straighten and the lines of his body remain taut as he returned to standing tall. She could feel his eyes on her as she bowed her head and then tucked her right leg behind her, praying not to fall over. As she straightened, she found him clenching his jaw at her, no doubt ready to comment on her poor balance. Instead he brought his right hand up to chest-height, palm facing her, and waited for her palm to meet his. She brought her hand up to his but refrained from touching him, afraid of what he might do. They kept about an inch between their hands as they stepped around each other in a circle. He held her eyes until the very last moment before Viktor was in front of her again, arms open for the next portion of the dance. She didn’t see him again that night, but Lavender told her later that he and Pansy had left early.

And there was a moment that really shouldn’t have been a moment after all, but Hermione really couldn’t judge herself when hormones were involved, now could she? She was standing in Umbridge’s office, waiting for Harry to finish with the Floo. He was talking to Kreacher through the fire and Hermione was so distracted by trying to figure out if Kreacher

was lying that she did not hear the office door open or the whispered "*Expelliarmus!*" from Umbridge's tiny mouth. As her wand flew out of her hand she drew a breath to warn Harry, turning to see Draco there as he clamped a hand over her mouth. He smirked at her in triumph as her eyes widened. He turned her around, keeping his hand over her mouth as her back landed against his front. She watched as Umbridge entered the room with the other Inquisitorial Squad members towing her friends. She tried to stomp the floor, kick the wall, anything so Harry wouldn't be dragged out of the fire by Umbridge's tiny hands, but then Draco's arm wrapped around her waist, fingers fanning over her hip bone, pulling her back to him. She felt electrified and terrified. He was so warm and firm behind her and his hand was so intimately placed. He had no idea, of course, that her heartbeat wasn't racing out of fear. Once Harry was pulled out of the fire, his wand flew through the air. Draco released her, shoved her into Milicent Bulstrode's arms, and caught Harry's wand before it hit the ground. Seeker reflexes. That was the extent of the moment, but it was enough to keep her awake some nights, dreaming and breathing.

Hermione took a breath and reached for the book with the grey spine, adding it to the pile of reserved requests.

"Are you back?"

Hermione turned to see Ginny staring at her. "Back?" she said.

"From the little trip you took?" Ginny smirked at her. Hermione chuckled and brought the books to the counter. Ginny stayed another half hour or so, but she dropped the subject of Draco Malfoy.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

A week had passed without another Daily Prophet picture of the Malfoy family. There were still articles hypothesizing on what Draco would do now, or if he would be visiting Lucius any time soon, but they were assigned to the middle pages of the prophet, probably not worth much without facts or a photo.

Hermione closed the paper and tucked it into the drawers next to the cash register. She was fortunate to have enough space at the U-shaped register desk to work on several things at once. She looked around the empty bookshop and breathed in her favorite scent: books. It was probably one of the main reasons she chose to ask for a part-time position at Cornerstone Books. The smell. Hermione missed the Hogwarts library more than her childhood home at times. It was the smell. It reminded her of fixing things, and the power of knowledge, and magic.

The front door squelched open, bringing a gust of wind, and her hair lifted off her neck before settling again. The positioning of Cornerstone Books on the corner of Diagon Alley and Horizont Alley was fortunate for marketability, but unfortunate for the wind tunnels and twisters created on the corner. Hermione patted her hair down and looked up to see the hag that always visited at 11AM on Saturdays. Hermione’s heart fell when she realized it was only 11AM.

The hag glanced at Hermione as she scuttled to the back. Hermione chanced a smile but knew it was no use. The hag had never spoken or smiled, eerily reminding Hermione of Bathilda Bagshot – or more accurately, the corpse of Bathilda Bagshot. She had asked Morty about the hag early on, wondering if she should keep an eye out for missing books, but Morty insisted that the hag had been a loyal customer though she’d never bought a thing.

Hermione grabbed up the pile of books to be shelved and headed to the fiction section. She placed them in their rightful spots, rearranging a few misfiled titles in her work. Honestly, who in their right mind would be so disrespectful as to pull a book off a shelf, look at it, and then place it back on another shelf? Hermione had set up a “To Be Filed” basket in every section of the store, hoping that the customers would use it.

A few customers were milling about, some sitting and reading the first few chapters before deciding. Hermione returned to the register desk and began filing yesterday's receipts that Morty had left for her.

"I thought you worked for the Ministry." A voice drawled from the counter.

Hermione whipped around and her eyes popped out of her skull when she saw Draco Malfoy standing at the register. His hair had changed. It was neither slicked back like the early years, nor cropped short like sixth year, but something in between. He had locks of blonde falling over his forehead. He was still lean from Azkaban, but he had more color, if you could call it that. Her eyes passed over his clothes, noting that he had well-tailored grey robes on. He raised a brow at her and she found her voice.

"No. I mean - I mean yes, I do, but not on the weekends. On the weekends I work here."

Draco stared at her, then looked around the store. "Obviously," he said. Hermione's neck grew hot. "But why?"

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She'd been asked that question multiple times by her friends, by admirers who stumbled upon Cornerstone Books. She'd always been able to answer with little anecdotes like "to keep busy" or "I miss the Hogwarts library" or "I get a discount!" But all of these sounded foolish when talking to Draco Malfoy.

"It's a bookstore. I like books." Hermione could have jumped in front of the Knight Bus right then and there. The blush spread up her jaw and she felt a bead of sweat rolling down her back.

He puffed a tiny laugh that didn't reach his eyes. "I remember." He'd perfected condescension over the years, or else Hermione wouldn't know how to spot it. "I'm picking up a book."

Hermione was abruptly reminded that she worked in a bookstore. A silly thing to forget as it just so happened to be the silliest thing she had ever explained.

"Yes, of course!" That was too chipper. She corrected herself. "Did you have it reserved?" Hermione started moving towards the drawer that held the pre-reserved books. Usually only the wealthy clientele would call ahead to reserve, much preferring to not mix with the consumer rabble.

"It's under Black." Her eyes flicked up to him. He shifted his weight and said, "It's my mother's order."

Curious.

She grabbed the first bag in drawer under "B." The parchment on top read *Goblin Wars: Fact or Fiction*.

"Oh, this is an excellent one!" She smiled brightly at the bag that held the book. "She hypothesizes that several of the Goblin Rebellions didn't actually take place, and that Wizards

created the myths of them to keep the goblins repressed. It's fascinating, actually!" She looked up and was startled when she realized she was gushing to Draco Malfoy about a book. She took a breath. "Your mother has excellent taste in books."

"I'll be sure to let her know," he said. His expression was unreadable. Almost a cross between bored and amused, if possible.

"Right," she said. "Well, the purchase has been billed to your mother's account." She held the bag out for him. "You're all set."

He took the bag from her. "Why Cornerstone?"

The question stopped her. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Then said, "I believe it's because it's located at the corner of Diagon Alley and Hor-"

"I know why it's named Cornerstone." He rolled his eyes and Hermione's cheeks warmed. "Why are you working here and not Flourish and Blotts? I would have thought you'd love to help the First Years pick up their text books and buy their parchment. Host monthly Gilderoy Lockheart fan club meetings."

The idea that he'd spent any time in his entire life thinking about what she would prefer to do after Hogwarts, without laughing endlessly at her of course, had her pulse racing. She tried to look away from his eyes and could not.

"I suppose I like Cornerstone because it's more out of the way. Less likely to be recognized here." The presumption of being recognized sounded silly and arrogant once it was out of her mouth, and Hermione finally tore her eyes away from him and looked down at the desk. She wished he would just leave.

"I used to come here during the summers for the same reasons."

She looked at him. He was staring off over her left shoulder.

"I never saw you here," Hermione said.

He brought his eyes back to her and she wished he hadn't. "That was sort of the point, wasn't it?" he said.

She couldn't read his face. It was completely blank. Her tongue was dry, so she nodded. She watched his eyes rove over her face once before taking his bag and giving her a head tilt, that she supposed was to be a "goodbye" or a "thanks."

And then she got to watch him walk away.

The next week was a blur. Apparently, the Wizarding world had no qualms about accused

murderers anymore if they looked like Draco Malfoy. The Daily Prophet started running stories on Draco's social life, where he went in the evenings, who he was with. Rita Skeeter had developed quite a knack for guessing his schedule, and also a talent for comparing his hair to the golden tones of the gods.

Hermione woke every morning to an article on her bedside table, lovingly cut and placed by Ginny, until Friday morning when the table was bare. Hermione got out of bed and went to the kitchen to find Ginny reading the Prophet while stirring her cereal.

"Good morning," Ginny said.

"Good morning." Hermione grabbed a teacup from the shelf and went to the kettle. "Did the Daily Prophet get sick of printing information on Malfoy, or did you just get sick of cutting them out for me?"

"There was nothing today." Ginny's voice sounded strained. Hermione paused in pouring her water.

"Really?"

"Yep. Nothing."

Hermione rounded the corner of the kitchen and stood with her teacup in one hand and the kettle in the other. "What is it?"

Ginny looked up at her with wide eyes and a closed mouth smile. "What's what?"

"What's in the paper today?"

Ginny sighed and her whole body slumped. "I don't think you should see."

"That's ridiculous. What's in the paper today?"

Ginny frowned and flipped the page to the society section.

"DRACO MALFOY FINDS LOVE"
by Rita Skeeter

Hermione slowly set the kettle down before she dropped it. A picture of Draco entering a restaurant with a tall brunette with silky long hair stared back at her. He placed his hand very low on her back and guided her inside - due to the fact, Hermione could only hypothesize, that she did not possess the brain capacity to walk by herself. She smiled at him over her shoulder as she entered. She was stunning.

"I mean," Ginny started, "It's not love. They're clearly on a first date. I don't recognize her from Hogwarts, so they can't have been courting for very long --"

"I'm fine, Ginny." Hermione pulled the paper towards her to see if Rita Skeeter had identified

the woman. Only the words "Bulgarian," "possible model," and "Durmstrang" jumped out to her. Hermione tore her eyes from the picture and looked up at Ginny. "It's stupid to think that he wouldn't be dating. I mean, look at him. He's been idolized all week as an eligible bachelor. And she's... she's terribly beautiful. He's... Well, he's not mine to lose."

Ginny stared at her. "Of course," she said. "I just didn't want you to be... distracted."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you." She took the kettle back to kitchen and began pouring milk into her cup. "Besides," she called out to Ginny, "Maybe it's for the best if he does start to court her. It may help me."

"You're right. I'm so happy that you see it that way. And also," Ginny yelled over her shoulder, "it's good to know that he likes brunettes!"

Hermione snorted and took a sip from her cup, before realizing that she did not steep a teabag. She was drinking hot water with milk.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn’t meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Hermione had been crossing T's and dotting I's in the ledger book for the past hour. Literally. She was combing through the financials trying to keep busy and trying to have a good reason for not filing books.

Because he came back.

Draco Malfoy was sitting in the lounge area of the fiction section, thumbing through a copy of the first book in a series that Hermione had heard only wonderful things about. She had yet to pick it up herself, but from the twenty minutes that Draco had spent on it, she could guess that it was brilliant.

He had entered the shop while she was at the register with a customer, and proceeded directly to the stacks to her left. She was grateful that he saved her from any awkward waving or chipper "good morning" banter by ignoring her completely, but now she was trying desperately to not notice him there. She could see the top of his head from in between the 4th and 5th shelves, and could see his hands turning pages from in between the shelves below that.

She had tried turning her back to him, so she wouldn't have to wave hello from across the store, or worse - be caught staring. But she soon found that not keeping an eye on him was worse. He could sneak up on her then.

His long fingers turned a page. She sighed. His hair fell into his eyes again and she saw his hand push it back.

"Miss?"

Hermione snapped her eyes to the register. A small elderly woman stood at the counter. How had she snuck up on her?

"Yes? What can I help you with?" Hermione smiled.

"I was hoping you could help me retrieve a Gerby Ganfried novel? I believe it is on a top shelf."

Hermione closed her eyes. Gerby Ganfried was a fiction writer. And fiction books were generally found in the fiction section, to her left. And Cornerstone Books had a charm placed on it to prevent summoning books, to help ward off theft. She pasted on a grin.

Hermione led the way into the fiction section, averting her eyes from the chair in the corner. She conjured a rolling ladder to reach the top shelf that held the "G" authors, and she thanked Merlin that she chose to wear Muggle jeans today instead of a skirt.

"Which Ganfried novel were you thinking of?" Hermione began to climb the ladder.

"Dear, would you mind reading the titles to me?"

Hermione took a breath. She usually loved helping customers, chatting with them about their selections and giving opinions. She would never have found this woman as frustrating if Draco Malfoy wasn't fifteen feet from her, possibly watching her.

"We have *Gertrude and Gwen and the Gargantuan Grindylow*. And then *Yaris, Yeigh, and the Yellow Yarn* -- "

"Oh, the *Yellow Yarn Doll*! Oh, what a lovely book!" the old woman said.

"Would you like me to pull it down for you?" Hermione turned over her shoulder to address the woman, but her gaze landed on Draco. He was smiling down at his book, laughing at her. She felt hot.

"Oh, no, dear. I've already read it. Can you read me the other titles?"

Hermione read the rest of the shelf to her. Then she read the first half of the shelf again. Eventually the woman - Beatrice, Hermione soon learned, as she had supplied that information while telling her about her entire childhood - asked her to pull down seven different copies so she could read the backs of them. She charmed the books to hover as she pulled them from the shelf, but Hermione still had to twist to reach the last three, and she could feel her shirt lift from the waistband of her jeans as she reached for each book. She hoped her midriff wasn't showing, and she hoped Draco's attention was refocused on his book.

"Oh, thank you so much dear!" Beatrice squeaked as Hermione descended the last rung of the ladder. She turned to find Draco's chair empty, and felt even more annoyed with Beatrice that she had ruined her final Draco-watching minutes of his visit.

She prepared a side table and chair for Beatrice to sit and peruse the books, and returned to the register. Hermione sighed in relief to find that there wasn't a line forming in her absence. The shop was usually very calm and not very busy, but there were times that Hermione needed to call Morty down from his flat upstairs to help. She turned around to put the ledgers away and when she faced the register counter again she found Draco leaning against it. Her

blood pounded in her ears.

"Malfoy." She greeted him. She smoothed down her shirt. "Did you end up liking the new Lance Gainsworth series?" The regret hit her instantaneously. How would she know what book he was reading earlier unless she'd been watching him?

It seemed the same thought crossed his mind as his eyebrow gave the slightest twitch upwards and a glint appeared in his eyes. He pulled the Gainsworth book he was reading earlier from below her sight line and tossed it on the counter.

"I'm not sure yet," he said, staring at the book. "But I thought I might as well purchase it, since I've already dog-eared the pages."

Hermione's hands paused halfway to taking the book. Her eyes snapped up to his. Dog-earing pages was the foulest thing one could possibly--

"Relax, Granger." He smirked at her. He was joking. Relief flooded into her veins like oxygen. She puffed a small laugh and tried to hide her smile. She pulled the ledger back onto the desk and began writing his receipt, billing the purchase to the family account. There were only three seconds of silence before she couldn't stand it any longer and delved into small talk.

"I haven't been able to start this series yet, but I absolutely loved his *Undesirable* series," she said without looking up at him.

"Really. What did you like about it?"

She met his eyes. He was looking at her like he had at Hogwarts, the faint edge of a smirk and the hint of an insult in his eyes.

"Well," she began, pushing the hair away from her face. "I appreciate his style. Each novel from the perspective of a different Undesirable, circling around the same moments until they finally coalesce into clarity –"

"I would argue that telling the same story over and over again is tedious," he said. "You get nowhere if you are only stuck on one moment."

He was staring directly into her eyes, waiting for her response. She felt like she was missing something.

"I… I disagree." She shook her head to clear it. "It isn't the same moment because you are getting the scene from seven different angles, and learning something new every time it is revisited." She could hear Lavender Brown's voice in her ear, something about agreeing with everything a boy says…

"I found it terribly dull." Draco shifted his weight, making him taller if possible. "The storylines were stale, the characters were unimaginative, and I couldn't connect with that dolt of an Auror running around, mucking up everything…"

While he spoke, Hermione opened her mouth, and closed it. Opened it again and made a small squeaking sound. He was decimating everything she loved about that series.

“I suppose he was a bit, er…underwritten,” Hermione lied.

“For being the only character to appear in all seven books, I found that he was remarkably uninteresting,” Draco said. His voice was so lazy and dispassionate. “The Auror had no outside family or friends, so what are we supposed to get from seven novels where he’s always two steps behind the Undesirables the entire time –“

“Exactly!” She squawked. “That’s what makes good drama, Malfoy! The Auror can’t be omniscient, or there would be no story!”

“That’s the other thing,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “Why seven novels? Can’t it be condensed at all? What about a trilogy? Or even better – one novel with seven perspectives, if you even need them all –“

“One novel!! Fit all of that information into one novel –??”

“If you could call it ‘information’ –“

“Well, Malfoy, you must have liked something about it if you read all seven books and –“

“I didn’t. I read two of them.”

Hermione gasped, eyes wide. He reached for a mint from the dish on the counter. He started to twist it between his fingers while watching her.

“You only read two! How can you even comment on the series then! The first two are almost juvenile in comparison to the third and fourth –“

“Oh, no,” he said. “I read the first and the last.”

Hermione gaped at him. She had always assumed he was intelligent due to his marks in school. In fact, when reaching for reasons why they would get on so well, one of the clearest reasons was their shared love of knowledge and always being right. She felt betrayed somehow.

“I… I don’t even know how to respond to that.” She shook her head at the counter. She finished the receipt, jabbing the quill into the ink pot, and grabbed a bag to stuff his book into. She ignored his eyes and the way his fingers played with the unwrapped mint.

“It’s just an opinion, Granger.” He sounded quite pleased with himself.

“Well, it’s the wrong opinion,” she mumbled. He laughed. Under other circumstances the sound of it would have sent electricity running through her veins.

She held the bag out to him, willing him to take it and leave.

“Ya know, Granger,” he said. He leaned forward on the counter, laying his forearms flat and clasping his hands, like he was coming down to her level. “You may have just reminded me why I loathe this Grainsword so much –”

“Gainsworth,” she corrected, clenching her fist around the bag.

“—Maybe I don’t want the new book after all.” His eyes flitted back and forth between her eyes, something glinting in them.

She’d had enough. She shoved the bag into his chest and pressed it there as she hissed, “You will take this damn book, Malfoy, and you will read it, and you will *love* it. And when you are done you will pick up the second book of the *Undesirable* series and you will read that, and then the third, and then the fourth and so on until you have read enough to make *intelligent* remarks about them.”

She sucked in her first breath and stared him down, her chest heaving. His eyes drifted over her entire face before his lips stretched into a smirk.

“There she is,” he whispered. Hermione blinked. He stood up straight, taking the bag from where she still had it pressed into his chest. “Thought we lost you, Granger.”

A blush spread up her jaw, warming her face. She searched him for an answer for the last five minutes, but only watched him pop the mint in his mouth, lift a brow at her, and turn to walk out.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

That following Monday was to be Draco's first day in the Auror office. Hermione rationalized that she hardly even saw Harry at work, so it stood to reason that she would not be seeing Draco during the day either. Ginny disagreed.

Monday morning arrived with Ginny waking her up an hour before normal time, rushing her to get into the shower, and then staring at her wet hair for twenty minutes with a comb while Hermione sipped her tea.

"Ginny, please don't go overboard. The likelihood of even seeing him today –"

"Is it more or less than him favoring the bookshop that you work at? Now sit still. I think I'm going to have to plait it."

Hermione yawned. Ginny ended up doing a rather nice job with her hair, braiding the hair at her temples and pulling it down into a side braid that lay on her right shoulder, but the minute she suggested makeup Hermione was out of the chair.

"Just mascara!" was Ginny's parting shot as Hermione slammed the door behind her on her way out.

Hermione came through the fire into the Ministry Atrium, and the first person she saw was Draco Malfoy. He was standing next to the new fountain that had been erected last year and Harry was with him. It took Hermione a few hurried steps to realize that the irritating voice ringing through the whole Atrium was Rita Skeeter, directing the two of them while her photographer ran in circles trying to capture their interaction.

Hermione kept her head down and watched them out of the corner of her eyes, veering left to the lifts. Skeeter's voice pierced the hall, asking for a handshake. Draco murmured something to Harry, and Harry smiled. This stopped her. Harry's smile broke into a small laugh. She stood there watching Harry and Draco chuckle, shaking their heads at something Harry said in response. It was such an odd yet comfortable sight. She should have known she was standing still for too long.

“Miss Granger!”

Rita had spotted her. Her eyes were bright with excitement and possibility. Harry saw her over Draco’s shoulder, giving her a look that said “run!”

Draco turned around. His eyes grazed her up and down before landing on her hair. Stupid Ginny.

“Miss Granger, what perfect timing!” Rita was fluttering over to her. She grabbed her arm and began dragging her over to the boys. “We would love to get a picture of you and Harry, welcoming Draco into the Ministry.”

“Wouldn’t Minister Shaklebolt be a better welcoming committee?” Hermione said. She was practically digging her heels in for the last few feet.

“Oh, no, no, no! Childhood rivals, now co-workers! Possibly friends! *That* is where the story is.”

Rita placed her at Harry's right side and asked her to smile as they shook hands again. She must not have been smiling, because Rita certainly was not.

“Miss Granger,” she reached for her. “Let me get a few words from you while the boys finish.”

Hermione trudged forward, and Rita grabbed her shoulder, taking her a few steps away.

“Miss Granger,” Rita began, and the Quick-Quotes Quill twitched over her shoulder. “How does it feel to have Draco Malfoy, long-time rival, and short-time Death Eater, working for the Ministry?”

Hermione swallowed and chose her words carefully. “I think Draco Malfoy is more than capable for the position. He had outstanding marks at Hogwarts and has always been very ambitious.”

Rita’s lips tightened. She tried again.

“Was it difficult for you, a victim of his abuse and hate for so many years, to see him this morning, in the Ministry Atrium, looking so at home?”

Hermione clenched her jaw and counted to five. “Draco Malfoy will fit in well with the Ministry. The Auror Office will be lucky to have him and --”

“Do you think the Ministry is the best place for a former Dark Wizard?”

“He was never a Dark Wizard!” Hermione forgot to count to five. “That, in fact, is an insult to Dark Wizards everywhere!”

The Quick-Quotes Quill tremored with joy as it scribbled, but Rita was very still, like a hawk who'd found its prey.

"Why did you speak at his trial, Miss Granger?"

Hermione counted to five. "It was the right thing to do."

"And have you and Mr. Malfoy interacted since his trial? Have you met privately?"

"No," Hermione said. No point in going into details. "Now, do you have enough? I am supposed to be upstairs in five minutes."

"Of course!" Rita bubbled. "Bozo, that's enough!" she yelled to the photographer. Rita grabbed Hermione's arm and dragged her back. "Let me have a moment with Mr. Potter, and let's get some shots of Mr. Malfoy heading to the lifts! Miss Granger, why don't you escort him?" Rita's eyes were sparkling.

"I don't work on his floor," Hermione said. "It would make the most sense –"

"Come now Miss Granger." Rita shoved her toward Draco. "It's for the paper. It doesn't have to be true."

Hermione shook her head, huffing out a breath. She glanced at Draco, who was looking at her, and then started to walk toward the lifts. She could feel him at her right side, and she could hear his shoes clicking on the floor. Dragon leather.

"Look into each other! Smile! We need the profile shot!" Rita was screeching from twenty feet away and the bulb of the camera was shooting light through the whole Atrium every two seconds. Hermione refused to give her what she wanted and kept her eyes on the lifts as they approached.

Draco reached for the golden grilles of an arriving lift and stood to the side to let her go through first. Chivalry from Draco seemed so out of place that Hermione glanced at him. He was looking down at her. He lifted a brow. She stepped through and felt the ghost of his hand on her back, guiding her, just like he had for the Bulgarian model in the papers. Draco stepped in after her and began to shut the gate.

"Alright, now come back and we'll do that again!" Rita's voice rang from the fountain. Other Ministry employees, those who hadn't already noticed Draco Malfoy and scuttled away, began to avoid their lift as the photographer closed in on them. "Not quite what we were going for!"

Draco continued to close the gate.

"Come back! Reset!"

Hermione watched him as he made a show of looking around the lift box for the way to get out, and then turned toward the photographer and yelled out, "Sorry! It's my first day!" He grabbed a hanging rope just as the box started to pull them backward and out of sight. Hermione sighed in relief.

It was quiet as the lift ascended to Level 7. The voice announced the Department of Magical Games and Sports and several interoffice memos flew in. She needed to break the silence.

“If you find that Skeeter is being too much of a ‘pest,’ I find that a jar with an Unbreakable Charm usually does the trick.” Hermione watched several memos fly out as they reached Level 6.

“How Slytherin of you.”

She looked at him. He was leaning against the wall of the lift, having claimed his balance again. He was smirking at her. She felt like this was a compliment, coming from him. She looked away as the lift moved to the side, heading upwards to Level 5. There was almost a need to justify herself.

“I just…” She reached for the explanation, “…hate her.” She shook her head and let out a nervous laugh. She looked at her shoes, which were quite sensible by Ginny’s standards.

“Come now,” he said, and she could hear the smirk in his voice. “I thought Hermione Granger left all her hate behind at Hogwarts.”

“No, there’s a special reserve,” she said. “Only for Rita Skeeter and those who do not appreciate Lance Gainsworth.”

She looked up at him, smiling. That was the closest he would ever get to an apology for her behavior at Cornerstone a few days earlier. She watched as his satisfied smirk morphed into a real grin.

The lift slowed to arrive at Level 5. He opened his mouth to say something.

“Granger!”

Hermione snapped her head to see Aiden O’Connor entering the lift with a huge dopey smile on his face.

“Perfect timing,” he said. “I need you.”

Hermione hid her grimace. He always had a way of being so blunt.

“Aiden. Good morning. You remember Draco Malfoy,” Hermione said by way of introduction.

Aiden turned to see Draco leaning against the wall of the lift. Hermione noticed Draco’s grin was gone. He stepped off of the wall and stood tall, reaching his hand out.

“Malfoy, of course,” Aiden said. He took Draco’s hand and smiled. Draco did not return the sentiment. “Aiden O’Connor. I was a year behind you lot at Hogwarts. It’s good to have you here at the Ministry.”

Hermione wished Skeeter was here for that. Aiden just gave her exactly what she was looking for all morning.

“Thank you,” Malfoy said. They released hands. “And what do you do here, Aiden?”

“I’m on Level 4 with Granger here, working in the Beast division.” Aiden nudged her arm with his elbow, a friendly move she’d never seen him perform.

Hermione felt the lift slow for Level 4 and she could hardly wait to jump out.

“You change your hair?”

Hermione looked up and Aiden was looking at her. His eyes were dancing around her face and her hair.

“Oh, um, yes.” She pushed a loose curl back over her ear. “I mean, no. It’s just braided.” She wished he would stop talking.

“It looks nice,” he said. No luck. “Out of your face, and everything.”

Hermione nodded at the ground. “Thank you.”

The lift stopped at Level 4, announcing the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Aiden stepped to the side and gestured for Hermione to lead the way.

“Good to meet you again, Malfoy. Best of luck,” Aiden said.

“Have a great first day, Malfoy,” Hermione said.

She raised her eyes off the ground to see Draco giving them a neutral expression as they stepped off. Hermione felt Aiden’s hand guide her through the lift, much like Draco’s had when they stepped in. She tensed. She didn’t dare look back at Draco.

What was with these men thinking she couldn’t walk on her own?

~*~

Hermione woke the next morning to a Daily Prophet clipping on her table. Rita’s article didn’t make front page – which made Hermione smile – but it was heavily featured across two pages in the middle of the paper.

A picture of Harry and Draco shaking hands accompanied the first page, with Rita’s hypothesizing of what exactly Draco would be doing at the Ministry. Hermione was so glad the picture of her awkwardly standing behind Harry didn’t make it.

But then on the second half of the article, a pull-quote screamed at her in large lettering:

“He was never a Dark Wizard”
-Hermione Granger, Brightest Witch of Our Age

Hermione closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. When she opened them she then saw the picture.

Bozo had captured them walking to the lifts together. She was almost unrecognizable with her hair in a braid, but of course as she watched the photo move, she saw Draco pull the grate open for her, and then she saw herself look up at him. It was clearly her in that profile.

She watched as she stepped through and Draco's hand came up to guide her. She sprung out of bed and opened her chest to find that clipping of the Bulgarian girl. She pulled the "Draco Malfoy Finds Love" article out of a shoe box, and placed the pictures side by side. She watched as he stepped to the side for the model, opened the door to the restaurant and placed his hand on her low back. Maybe lower on the model's back than on her own, but she was still looking at the same move. She breathed a sigh of relief that maybe Draco wasn't actually courting the Bulgarian, maybe he was just a Pureblood gentleman.

Her smile left her face as she read the second page of the article where Rita Skeeter had taken extreme liberties with their interview. Apparently, Hermione had been gushing about Draco's good qualities with the gleam of infatuation in her eyes.

Perfect.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Hermione survived the rest of the week without running into Draco. Not in the lifts, not at the café, not in the Atrium on the way in. She didn't let Ginny do her hair again. She'd told her "the wrong person noticed," which had gotten Ginny into quite a tizzy trying to figure out what she meant by that.

Friday rolled around and Hermione was glad to see the clock tick toward five o'clock. Sometimes Harry and a few other Aurors would head to a pub after work on Fridays, and Harry had invited her today. She didn't really drink, but a Butterbeer sounded wonderful about now.

It was 4:42 when Hermione heard footsteps coming by her cubicle. She looked up to see Harry round the corner. He was breathing hard, like he'd run.

"Harry," she said. "What is it?"

"I've made a mistake," he said. He ran his hand through his hair and shifted his glasses on his face. Hermione felt a tightness in her chest that she hadn't felt for almost two years.

"What's wrong?"

Ginny rounded the corner, also out of breath.

"Ginny! Is everything okay?"

"It will be!" She grinned. Things must not be that dire if Ginny was grinning.

"I, er…" Harry began. He lowered his voice. "I was talking with some of my team about going out to the pub tonight, and Malfoy was a few feet away."

Ginny was pulling a comb and pins out of her purse. Hermione stared at her, uncomprehending.

"And," Harry continued. "I said 'Hey Malfoy, if you're not busy after work…'"

As Ginny started tugging on Hermione's hair, she suddenly understood.

"We've got it, Potter. You can go," Ginny said, spinning Hermione's chair around.

"Wha--?" Hermione tried.

"Again, really sorry, Hermione," Harry said. He walked back to the lifts.

Ginny tugged on her hair to get her to face forward.

"We'll try something different this time, yeah?" Ginny said.

"Ginny, stop." Hermione turned in her chair. "You don't need to do this. I'll be fine."

"Listen up, Granger." Ginny leaned down and placed her hands on Hermione's armrests, bringing her face level with hers. "You have to try. There's no harm in trying."

"There's something to be said for 'trying' too hard," Hermione said. A thought hit her. "Did Harry call you?"

Ginny nodded. "He popped through the floo, said, 'I've just made a horrible mistake, I've invited Malfoy out with us tonight,' and I told him to go tell you and I'd be right there."

Hermione didn't know whether to be comforted that she had such caring friends, or insulted that no one thought she could dress herself.

"And this time," Ginny threatened. "We're doing mascara."

~*~

Hermione was able to stop her at lip gloss at least. Ginny had pulled the hair at her temples back into braids again, but let the rest hang down, using her wand to spin a few unruly locks into the curls they should be. Ginny didn't let her see herself until they were on their way to the pub, but she had to admit that Ginny had done a good job. The mascara was weighing on her eyes though.

The pub was particularly crowded for 5PM. They'd come here after work loads of times, but it was never like this. Ginny lead Hermione through the crowd to their usual corner, bumping elbows with people on the way. Katie Bell waved them over to their table and gave them both huge hugs. Katie had started at the Improper Use of Magic Division right after the Battle of Hogwarts, so she usually joined them on their Friday nights out.

"Hermione!" Katie said. "You look so pretty!"

Hermione glared at Ginny. Ginny grinned.

“I’m going to go take my hair out,” Hermione said, but Ginny grabbed her arm when she began to walk away.

Ginny turned to Katie. “She’s trying something new. Trying to get someone’s attention.”

“Ginny!” Hermione gaped. Ginny laughed and flounced away. Hermione turned to Katie, “That’s not… I mean she’s—“

“It’s Friday night, Hermione!” Katie laughed. “You’re allowed to be a young woman!” Katie leaned into her. “Who is it?”

“It’s not… I mean, he probably won’t even be here tonight,” Hermione lied.

“Oh!” Katie had a thought, then leaned into Hermione. “Did you hear Harry invited Draco Malfoy? What a dolt!”

Hermione sighed, but then remembered pieces of Sixth Year --

“Katie, oh no. I’m so sorry. Are you okay with Malfoy being here?”

Katie waved her hand in front of her face. “It’s fine,” she said. “I’ve been working with him all week, now. Besides, he actually came to my cubicle on the first day and apologized for it all.”

“He… He did?” Hermione didn’t expect this at all.

“Yeah, he just said he wanted to clear the air.” Katie took a sip from her water glass. She smiled facetiously at Hermione and said, “What? He hasn’t made it to Level 4 yet to apologize to you for years of name calling and torture?”

Hermione chuckled. “No, not yet. But perhaps he started with the crimes punishable by law.”

Katie laughed. “He’s actually not all that bad. He’s changed since Hogwarts.”

“Really?” Hermione pried, “What’s he been like at work?”

“Agreeable, actually. He’s much more reserved and doesn’t walk with his nose in the air like he used to.”

Hermione was going to ask more, but then Ginny returned with a handful of Firewhisky shots.

“Who’s got his nose in the air?” Ginny waggled her eyebrows at Hermione. “Draco Malfoy?”

“How’d you guess?” Katie laughed.

Ginny handed Hermione a glass and when Katie refused hers with a smile, Ginny took half and forced Hermione to down the rest. Hermione would have to stick to Butterbeer for the rest of the night.

“Let’s join the boys!” Ginny yelled over the noise. It was even louder than when they came in.

As Katie and Ginny led her to the corner, she could just pick a drawl out of the racket. They were at a high-top table. It was Draco, Harry, and Anthony Goldstein. Harry stood and kissed Ginny and gave Hermione’s arm a squeeze. Katie stood at the head of the small table, while Draco and Harry were across from each other. Anthony was against the wall, on Draco’s left. Ginny went to the open stool on Harry’s right. Hermione actively did not look at Draco.

They were talking about a case at work. Even Ginny knew some details through Harry, so Hermione was the only one trying to catch up. Something about a few Durmstrang students and an old family estate out on the English countryside. She didn’t dare ask them to start from the beginning, so she just propped herself against the wall next to Ginny’s stool and listened.

Draco would speak every so often. It seemed his expertise was on the families of the Durmstrang students, and that Lucius was close friends with the Scandinavian Minister. Hermione found herself watching the way his hands held his Firewhisky tumbler. He had a ring on his left thumb that Hermione had seen often as a sort of Slytherin house ring. The ring would tap the glass in a rhythm only he knew, but that didn’t stop Hermione trying to figure it.

She felt Ginny lean in to her left ear. “Stop staring at his hands and go buy another round for the table.”

Hermione flushed and Ginny laughed at her. Hermione thought that was a wonderful idea, seeing as she couldn’t join the conversation and she couldn’t stop fixating on him. She squeezed out of the corner she found herself in, and made her way to the bar. She heard his voice saying something over the din, and then the table laughed. Old habits caused her to tense, as if the joke was about her, but she had to remind herself that Harry and Ginny would never laugh at her like that.

She asked the bartender for another round for the boys in the corner, a Firewhisky shot for Ginny, and two Butterbeers for Katie and her. She levitated the drinks over the crowd and landed them down one at a time in front of their owners.

“Oi! You’re a right queen, you are, Granger!” Anthony downed his earlier tumbler and accepted the new one.

Draco’s new drink clinked against that damned ring as she levitated it into his hands. She magically gathered the empty glasses and sent them back toward the bartender.

“After you’re done liberating the dragons and the centaurs, Granger, you should consider a career in waiting tables,” Draco said.

Hermione looked at him, waiting for the insult, but there was none.

Ginny stepped in with “This is actually quite rare. I’m more used to her breaking glasses than cleaning them.”

“Hey!” Hermione nudged Ginny after the glasses landed safely at the bar. Hermione handed a Butterbeer to Katie which she didn’t take.

“Actually,” Katie said, smiling. “This is the perfect time to tell you the news.” She looked around the table and said, “I’m pregnant.”

Ginny gasped. “No!” She giggled.

The boys joined with a chorus of congratulations. Hermione squeezed her arm, but was trying to remember who Katie was dating, because she certainly was not married.

“So, Harry,” Katie said. “I guess I’m going to have to bow out of Quidditch for a bit.”

“Katie!” Anthony jumped in. “You have the worst timing! We play Magical Games and Sports next Sunday!”

Katie laughed, “I’m sorry! I’ll tell the baby to wait another few months!”

“There’s an interdepartmental Quidditch league at the Ministry?” Draco asked.

The awkward silence was short lived. Harry turned to Draco.

“Yes, we formed it just a few months back. You game, Malfoy?” Harry smiled. It seemed so natural, this acquaintance.

Draco smirked. “I’m sure you already have a Seeker?” Draco directed at Harry.

“We’re scrimmaging without a Snitch, so I’ve actually been trying out Chaser. If Katie’s out then we’ll need a third, with me and Ginny.”

Draco looked to Ginny. “And how did you manage to make the D.M.L.E. team if you are not a D.M.L.E. officer?”

“Dating Harry Potter has its perks.” Ginny smiled.

“I’ll have to try it sometime,” Draco said, smirking at her. Anthony choked on his drink. Harry wrinkled his nose. Ginny held his stare with a smile, and Katie burst out laughing.

Hermione just watched. Her mind flashed to the moment outside of the Room of Requirement, Draco holding Goyle’s unconscious body, screaming Crabbe’s name. She felt a stab of irritation as she wondered where Pansy Parkinson was and how she would feel about Draco Malfoy having drinks with Harry Potter and Hermione Granger.

Harry invited Draco to tomorrow’s practice, meaning that Hermione would not see him at Cornerstone tomorrow. She felt disappointed and relieved at the same time. She sipped her Butterbeer while they talked Quidditch, and as her stomach warmed, her lashes felt even heavier with the mascara. She should go to the bathroom and try to take the goo off.

“Granger, you’re at Flourish and Blotts, yeah?”

Hermione looked up to see Anthony looking at her.

“Cornerstone, actually.” She set her Butterbeer down, just now noticing that she had absently sipped half of it.

“That’s right. My mum has been trying to read more. Can you recommend anything?”

Hermione opened her mouth, but a drawl beat her to it.

“She should try the *Undesirable* series.”

She glared at Draco. He smirked at her with that glint in his eyes.

“It’s really quite crafty,” he continued, but he wasn’t looking at Anthony. “It’s seven novels, all different perspectives on the same moments. Some would say that it’s tedious that way, but Gainsworth manages to keep it interesting, revealing new information each time the scene is revisited.”

“Okay, thanks,” Anthony said. “And it’s by…?”

“Lance Gainsworth.” Hermione jumped him to it. She watched his lips twitch. He took a sip from his tumbler.

“And you agree, Hermione?” Anthony said to her.

“Oh, yes,” she said, glaring down Draco. “You could even say that I have the exact same opinion.”

“Great.” Anthony’s voice floated over to her. “I’ll have to come by to pick up the first one.”

She watched as Draco smiled and slipped off his stool, heading to the bar. Sometime during the last minute Ginny had moved to talk with Katie about the baby. Harry and Anthony began a conversation about Quidditch again. She took Ginny’s stool. It felt better to sit. She drank her Butterbeer down, anticipating leaving soon.

“Granger!”

Hermione winced at hearing a friendly, yet intrusive voice over her shoulder.

“Hi Aiden.” She turned around and gave him a convincing smile.

“You keep doing your hair differently. I almost didn’t recognize you!” Aiden leaned against the wall behind her stool, forcing her to turn all the way around to hold a conversation.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like Aiden. She thought he was perfectly nice. He just had a quality that was a little… absent.

“I was going to invite you out with us tonight, but I couldn’t find you. Funny coincidence, huh?”

“Definitely.” Hermione said, not committing to any conversation.

Aiden sipped on what seemed like his third Butterbeer. She looked over his shoulder to see three guys that were with him that she didn’t recognize, but Harry seemed to know one of them. He’d gotten off his stool and was saying hello. Aiden took the opportunity to sit on Harry’s empty stool next to her. And again she had to turn all the way around to face him.

“Did you see the article in the paper this morning on the Horntail they found?”

“Yes. I’m sure we’ll be working on that all next week,” Hermione said. She’d found the article next to the most recent Draco Malfoy story by Rita Skeeter. She took a sip and found her Butterbeer empty. How?

Aiden saw this and jumped up. “Let me get you another drink.”

Just as Hermione was about to tell him “no, thank you,” a hand appeared placing a Butterbeer down in front of her on the table. She stared at the Slytherin ring for a moment before looking up.

Draco wasn’t looking at her, but instead was giving a condescending smile to Aiden.

“O’Connor, wasn’t it?” he said.

“Yes. Malfoy, good to see you.” Aiden stuck his hand out and Malfoy took it. “How was your first week?” Aiden smiled brightly. Hermione couldn’t figure out how he didn’t pick up on Malfoy’s dislike of him. Or anyone’s dislike of him, really.

“Excellent, thank you.” That was all.

Aiden smiled and nodded. “I’m going to get another drink. I’ll see you around Malfoy! Granger,” Aiden placed his hand on her shoulder, possibly as a goodbye. “We’ll talk Monday!”

Draco watched him walk away. Hermione grabbed the Butterbeer he’d placed in front of her.

“Thank you,” she said under her breath. She sipped it, but knew she shouldn’t finish it.

Draco sat in the empty stool next to her. He faced her. Hermione realized that no one else was going to join their conversation because they were busy with their own. She took another sip of her Butterbeer.

“He reminds me of Weasley.”

Hermione put down her drink and wiped at her mouth.

“Ron?”

“No, the mother.” Draco rolled his eyes. “Yes, Ron.”

Hermione looked at Aiden by the bar, chatting and smiling. She didn’t quite see it.

“Is it the way he smiles and shakes your hand that brings up memories of Ron,” Hermione asked. She looked at him under her lashes and smiled.

“That must be it.” Draco smirked.

"You seem to be fitting in with the Gryffindors quite nicely." Hermione reached for the drink to do something with her hands, but stopped herself before taking a sip. Maybe this was how some developed a drinking problem: nervous sipping.

"Well, Goldstein is a Ravenclaw, so we cling to each other whenever anyone tries to run into a burning building to save kittens."

Hermione smiled. She forgot her promise to herself and took another sip.

"I would have thought you'd be saving house-elves, not studying dragons."

Hermione met his eyes over the top of her glass. If he meant an innuendo, his face didn't betray it. She swallowed and licked the foam off her lips.

"I do want to work in Relocation," she said, picking a point over his shoulder to stare at so she didn't have to look into his eyes while she spoke. "I hope to move there when there's an opening, but the Beast division is fine for now."

"Shouldn't they be bending over backwards to give you whatever position you desire? Or did you forget to put 'Golden Trio’ on your resume?"

"I actually submitted under a false name." She looked down at her hands. Her nails needed to be done. She hoped no one had seen them this week.

"And why was that?"

She looked up at him, remembering that they were in the middle of a conversation. Her and Draco. Conversing. How odd.

"I didn't really want to be handed anything after the war," she said, looking over his shoulder again. "I wanted to earn my position based on merit and not on who I befriended as a First Year." She sipped her drink again and the cool liquid felt so nice.

There was silence. She checked in with him, wondering if she'd bored him.

He was frowning at her.

"You think that's why they call you the Golden Girl?" He lifted a brow. “Because Potter and Weasel allowed you into their club?”

She held her breath, waiting for him to tell her why. She watched him as he watched her and found her eyes drawn to the corner of his mouth where he hid his smirk. A small voice in her head told her that staring at his mouth was probably the wrong thing to do.

“Hey Granger!”

Hermione jumped and searched the room to see Aiden waving at her. Wonderful.

“We’re headed down the street to the new pub on the corner. Wanna come with?” Aiden quirked his head back towards several other people from her department who she didn’t know were there.

“Oh, no. Thanks though!” She smiled, hoping he would just leave so that Draco could tell her why she was golden. Or something like that.

“Alright!” he yelled back to her. “But I still owe you for lunch last week, so I got your drink next time!” He smiled like a huge puppy and waved at her, nodding at Malfoy. Hermione didn’t even remember buying his lunch last week. She took a sip of her drink and watched as Aiden walked out with their coworkers.

“How long have you been seeing him?”

Hermione’s eyes snapped back over to Draco. His face was neutral.

“I’m sorry?” she said.

“O’Connor,” he said. “You’re together?” He sipped his drink and watched her over the top of his glass.

She opened her mouth to protest, to correct him, to say anything, but Harry’s voice interrupted them.

“Hey, Ginny and I are going to head out.” He was standing over Draco’s shoulder. “Hermione, did you want to stay or side-along with us?”

She really wanted to correct Draco, but that wasn’t one of the options given.

“I’m about to head out too,” Draco said. He started to stand. She needed to return to that other conversation. “She should side-along with you, Potter. She shouldn’t be apparating anywhere.”

They were talking about her like she wasn’t even there. She started to get off the stool.

“I’ll be fine. I only had like –“

She slipped a bit, but was able to stabilize. The stools were a bit higher than she thought they were. Not the best evidence for her case. Harry chuckled and reached out his hand for her. She frowned at him and extended her arm, and realized that Draco’s hand was on her elbow. He must have caught her as she slipped. He released her just as she looked down to where his hand was on her. He’d touched her bare skin with his hand and she had missed it entirely.

“So tomorrow at Hodgley Field, Malfoy?” Harry was escorting her out, but Hermione still felt like there was something she needed to say.

“Looking forward to it, Potter.”

“Goodnight, Draco,” she said. Maybe that was it? Her head was fuzzy. She looked at him one last time. He was standing very still as they moved away from him, looking at her.

She let Harry pull her out the door. He was stifling a smile and as Ginny met them outside, Ginny asked, “What’s so funny?”

Harry laughed out loud after the door had closed all the way.

“You called him Draco.” Harry’s eyes were glistening. Hermione felt the warmth leave her face as she stood stock still.

“Oh, my god!” Ginny cackled.

“Oh, my god,” Hermione covered her face with her hands.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Thanks everyone for leaving comments and kudos! I call this chapter The Calm Before the Storm. :)

Saturday morning found Hermione stumbling to her bathroom in search of Pepper-Up Potion. She'd never had a hangover, so she wasn't sure if this was one. She felt marginally better after drinking the potion before she remembered that she needed to leave for work in twenty minutes.

As she got dressed she remembered that Draco would be at the Quidditch practice today, and therefore would most likely not be stopping by Cornerstone. Hermione frowned at herself in the mirror. She looked so tired with dark circles around her eyes. She then realized that it wasn't dark circles, it was the mascara she didn't take off before crawling into bed.

She laughed and went to wash her face.

Feeling much fresher, she headed out the door to the apparition point.

"Miss Granger! Over here!" The journalist with the camera called to her as she popped into Diagon Alley. She continued on without responding. "What are you going to do for your birthday tomorrow?"

Now *there* was a good question. Her twentieth birthday had crept up on her. She was always older than the rest of her classmates, but to be entering her twenties when Ginny had just turned eighteen was very strange.

Harry had mentioned taking her to dinner, but that was all she really had planned. Morty had penned her a note midweek, chastising her for not telling him about her birthday, and

demanding that she take the day off, so she couldn't spend the day there. Maybe she'd sleep? That seemed wrong.

After the first two hours of looking up whenever someone entered the shop, expecting it to be Draco, Hermione finally relaxed. Quidditch practice usually lasted until about noon, but then they would head out for lunch, or stay and chat for a few hours. The practices Hermione had attended had all dragged on much longer than she felt was necessary.

Eventually she had to turn her back on the front door. She was only going to be disappointed when Draco didn't come by Cornerstone today. It wasn't as if they had a standing date, but he'd been in the past two weekends. Perhaps he took such offense to the use of his first name the night before that he would no longer be visiting her here.

Hermione shook her head. No, he was not *visiting* her. He was patronizing a book shop.

The door opened and while her back was turned she could feel the wind dance with her hair. It took every ounce of control not to turn around.

"Who do you have to know to get a book around here!" a familiar voice boomed from the doorway.

Hermione turned with wide eyes to see Ron Weasley on her "Welcome" carpet.

"Ron!" She gasped and he smiled at her, stretching his arms out.

She whipped around the counter and flew down the two steps to the entry landing, throwing her arms around him.

She felt her feet leave the ground as he squeezed her in his arms. It was like the past year and a half had never happened. That was her favorite thing about seeing Ron. Nothing ever changed.

"Happy birthday 'Mione."

Her feet touched down again, and she released her grip on him, but kept her arms around him, pulling back.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be training for the October season."

"I told them our second string could use some practice. I had to get home to see a girl."

She pulled back and punched his arm, smiling up at him. "You're not here only for my birthday."

"Well, it was a main reason! I have a meeting with George and several investors this afternoon and then a cocktail party tonight with some Minister of something, but I'm all yours tomorrow."

He smiled down at her and everything seemed very simple. Having someone hold her, friendly yet intimate touching. And there was an uncomplicated warmth that Ron always

brought with him.

“Well,” she said. “I work today until six, but tomorrow I have the day off.”

“The day off? Hermione Granger takes the day off? Merlin, you’ve changed so much.” He teased her and released her hips, taking a look around the shop. “This is a nice little place.”

Hermione skipped up the steps to the counter. “I like it. It’s very quiet.” She moved back behind the counter. “So, when did you get in?”

He leaned down on the counter between them. “A few hours ago. I stopped by Hodgley Field first,” Ron said.

Hermione’s hands stuttered over the books she started sorting. “Oh?”

“Did you know Harry let Malfoy join their little Quidditch team? That’s insane!”

“Oh, I know,” Hermione tried to meet his indignation.

“I hear he’s hanging around a lot more. Git can’t find his own friends?”

“Ha, I guess not.” Hermione turned from the counter to grab the ledger.

“His friends are all either dead or in Azkaban, I’m sure.”

Hermione winced, but turned to smile at him. Ron’s dislike of Draco was legendary. And the feeling was mutual, Hermione was certain. She changed the subject to Ron’s Quidditch team and how everything was going for him in Ireland. She noticed he conveniently left out little details, like the dates he took to certain after parties, and incidents the papers had covered about him getting thrown out of pubs with teammates and fangirls. That was alright. Hermione just wanted to chat with her friend Ron, not her ex-boyfriend.

He stayed for another hour, chatting and helping her sort books. She completely forgot about Draco Malfoy and for that, she was grateful. Ron left to head to his meeting with George, but on his way out he gave her a kiss on the cheek that lingered very close to the corner of her mouth. He grinned at her as the door closed behind him.

On Sunday, Hermione woke up to balloons covering her entire bedroom ceiling. She smiled and crawled out of bed, following the smell of breakfast from the kitchen.

She tiptoed out of her bedroom to find Harry and Ginny in the kitchen. Harry had his back to her, working the bacon on the stove, and Ginny was sitting on a countertop kicking her legs. They were chatting in hushed voices, smiling at each other, feeding each other. Hermione almost disappeared back into her bedroom to give them privacy before she remembered that it was her breakfast they were preparing for *her* birthday.

She gave a little cough to announce her presence before moving into the kitchen. Ginny jumped off the counter and threw her arms around her.

“Happy birthday, Hermione!”

“Good morning, Gin. Thank you.” Hermione released Ginny only to be engulfed by Harry next.

“Happy birthday,” he said, squeezing her tight.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said. “You didn’t need to cook breakfast.”

“Oh, but I did.” Harry pulled away and gave Ginny a pointed look.

Ginny forced her to sit and let them serve her. Quite ridiculous actually. When she stood to get more milk for her tea, Ginny threatened her with the spatula to remain seated.

Hermione sat back in her chair, shaking her head, and as Harry was folding the morning’s *Daily Prophet*, she caught a glimpse of a blonde head. Harry tossed the paper on the floor, and Hermione asked, “Anything good in the paper today, Harry?”

He shook his head. “A mention of the twentieth birthday of the ‘Golden Girl,’ of course.” He smiled at her and she frowned at him.

“Did she really use that phrase?”

“Of course she did.” Harry laughed. “Here, let me show you how she rambles on about you —“

“Ah-ah! No papers today!” Ginny interrupted. “No news!” Ginny gave Harry a look that he immediately understood. Hermione was lost unfortunately.

“No news?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, no news.” Ginny placed the milk on the table in front of Hermione. “We are celebrating today, and nothing else will distract us! Eat your eggs,” she concluded, in a very Molly-Weasley-like manner.

They chatted over breakfast about work, about Ron being home, about nothing really. Ginny had made plans for dinner that evening at one of the nicer restaurants in Wizarding London, so after a very pleasant day of doing nothing but enjoying the company of her best friends, they met up with Ron at about five o’clock to stroll the neighborhood before heading to their six o’clock reservation. Ron kissed her on the corner of her mouth again, and she felt his hand on her ribs as he pulled away.

It struck her as they were seated at a four-person table - Harry at her left, Ron at her right, and Ginny across from her - that this was just as it was supposed to be. The four of them were very simple when they were not saving the Wizarding World. Ron was telling a story with loud arm gestures, Ginny was rolling her eyes at him, Harry was correcting him, and Hermione was laughing. They were not war heroes or famous child wizards or Quidditch players. They were four friends. Two couples. She could maybe get used to that again.

After presents, after dessert, Harry and Ron walked the girls to the apparition point.

“I think I will be back next month, maybe around Halloween,” Ron said. Her arm was in his and he was very warm.

“Wonderful. We’ll need to plan something then.”

“I do miss you very much, Hermione.”

She glanced up at him. He was looking down at her with a sad smile. She beamed at him and squeezed his arm close to hers.

“I miss you very much as well. We all do. But I’m very proud of you for pursuing your dreams, Ron.”

He smiled at the ground. When they reached the apparition point, Harry kissed Ginny goodbye and gave Hermione a hug. Ron punched his sister’s arm and hugged her. Then he turned to Hermione and held her tight. He pulled away and placed a simple kiss to her lips. She smiled up at him.

~*~

“HERMIONE GRANGER AND RONALD WEASLEY IN LOVE AGAIN!”
by Rita Skeeter

In uncertain times, we look towards hope. We look towards those who give us hope.

Over the past eight years, Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley have given us hope in many forms, but they now offer us a different kind of hope. A hope for happily ever after.

Hermione gaped at the picture on the page. She’d never even seen the camera man, but Bozo had gotten the kiss. The kiss that… when thinking later, didn’t mean anything to her. She’d thought maybe Ron was trying to make her a promise to return for her, or to be true to her. But there was nothing to be true for. They were not together and they hadn’t been in over a year.

Of course, Skeeter’s article disagreed.

Ever since the Final Battle, Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have been in touch despite the distance. Miss Granger visits her beloved in Ireland every weekend, and Ronald Weasley was just seen visiting her at work this Saturday.

After a birthday dinner for Miss Granger yesterday with only close friends, Mr. Weasley bid her goodnight with a promise for their future. My only question, dear readers, is… have we had a look at Miss Granger’s ring finger?

Hermione huffed. She crumpled the paper and tossed it in the rubbish bin. It took her twenty minutes of stewing and pouting before she could pull herself together enough to head to work.

Arriving in the Ministry Atrium, she was surrounded by her face kissing Ron’s. It seemed that everyone was reading a paper, had a paper tucked under their arm, was gesturing wildly

with a paper. She embarked on a direct course for the lifts, hoping she was giving off the impression that she was in a foul mood and nobody better talk to her today.

She jumped into the first lift available, filled with several Ministry employees coming up from the lower floors. Some from the Atrium joined her in the lift, some who she recognized by face, not by name. She reached up to grab a hanging rope, and as the lift zoomed backwards she noticed several witches turn towards her. She frowned back at them. She was used to people staring at her – she generally looked at the floor when this happened – but today she was so angry with Skeeter, with Bozo, with Ron….

The lift stopped at Level 6 and admitted a witch in bright blue robes. She joined the crowded lift and grabbed on, standing in front of Hermione. It wasn't until that witch turned around, smiled at her, and quickly looked up that Hermione realized she had grabbed a rope with her left hand. Everyone was looking for the blasted ring.

"I'm not engaged! Stop looking for a ring!"

Silence. Every witch that had been looking at her hand stood still as a statue. The wizards who had no idea what was happening, edged away from her. The lift slowed and stopped at Level 5, and almost every single person exited, even though Hermione was sure not everyone worked at the Department of International Magical Cooperation. She was a right nutter.

Two men stayed on with her as the lift headed to Level 4. She looked up to apologize to them and found herself looking at Draco Malfoy.

He must have been tucked in the back when she jumped on at the Atrium, because there was no way she could have missed him otherwise. He had a neutral expression on his face as he stared at her.

She let out a nervous laugh. "Sorry," she said. "It's been a long day already."

The other man nodded. Draco blinked.

"Obviously." A drawl.

The lift stopped at Level 4. She jumped out and didn't look back. She got to her desk and just as she sat, breathing again, Aiden appeared eating an apple.

"Oi! Let's have a look at the ring."

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

Excited for this chapter! Enjoy.

By Tuesday morning, everyone on Level 4 knew not to look for a ring, ask her about her coming nuptials, or even glance her way. The rest of the day on Monday had been so tense after she had screamed at Aiden for filing a case file incorrectly, that Mathilda probably sent out some kind of a memo. Word must have traveled up to Level 2, because Harry appeared at her cubicle on Wednesday just before lunch.

“How’s the bride-to-be?” He smiled.

She glared at him, and continued throwing files around in an order only she knew.

“Come on. Let’s go down to the café.”

“I’m not hungry,” she bit out.

“Well, *I* am and *I* want some company.” He grinned at her. “Besides, those files will still be here in half an hour, and they will still be in need of some roughing up.”

She looked down and realized that every file she’d touched had now been crumpled, torn, or bent. She sighed and grabbed her coin purse.

Once alone in the lifts, Harry turned to her.

“So who is it you’re really upset with? Ron or Skeeter?”

“Both, but mainly me.” She closed her eyes and pressed her temples. “I’m so angry that I let him kiss me.”

There was silence. The gates opened and a few memos flew out.

“Do you want to get back together with Ron?”

She looked up at him. Harry’s face was completely open to her. He wasn’t hoping for an answer. He was asking her from honest curiosity. She tried as honest an answer as she could.

“Not really, no. Or maybe it’s ‘not now’? I’m not really sure.” She pushed up the sleeves of her robes. “I just don’t like feeling like the choice is being taken from me. By Rita *bloody* Skeeter!”

The lifts arrived at the Atrium. Harry led out, saying over his shoulder, “Most sensible people know that Rita publishes absolute drivel most of the time. I mean, look at what she said about Malfoy over the weekend! He’s been in a right state too!”

Hermione stopped, letting Ministry employees push past her to get into their lift. Her mind flitted through the events of the weekend, and found no Malfoy article.

“Which article was that?” She found her legs again and followed.

Harry turned to walk backwards as he led the way to the café. “You know, the one about him visiting his father? And her guesses at why they were meeting? But, she wasn’t there. She couldn’t have known. Absolute drivel.”

Hermione didn’t bother reminding him that she *could* have been there, a *fly-on-the-wall*. “What day was this?”

“He visited Saturday, after our Quidditch practice I guess,” Harry said, lowering his voice as they entered the café and joined the back of the line. “The article was published Sunday.”

The faint memory of a blonde head on the front page, Ginny not letting her read the article…. Hermione made a mental note to check the rubbish bins for Sunday’s paper.

“What did it say? What was she hypothesizing?”

Harry turned to her and she could see now the same look on his face when Ginny told him not to share the paper with her.

“Just… why he was visiting Lucius.” He grabbed a tray and stared at it.

“Harry, I’m going to find it and read it anyway.”

Harry sighed and scratched his jaw. He looked around the café to make sure no one could eavesdrop. “She brought up Draco’s inheritance, and how he might be trying to get it released to him early.”

Hermione squinted at him. “And he needed to speak to Lucius? Shouldn’t all of his money be available to Narcissa?”

They arrived at the front of the line then, and Hermione had to wait while Harry ordered tea and two of the croissants he'd been pestering her about. Then when he stepped aside for her to order, and she realized that both croissants were for *him*, she stifled a smile and ordered one for herself.

"Some of the Pureblood families have their money guarded with old magic," Harry said. Hermione nodded. She knew a little about this, but clearly Harry knew more. He continued, "Most likely in Malfoy's case, his inheritance would be released to him on his wedding day, after Lucius performed a ritual passed down through the Malfoy men."

Hermione's eye twitched at the words "wedding day." Harry found a little table that mysteriously became available the moment The-Boy-Who-Lived-And-Died-And-Lived-Again looked at it. He smiled in thanks at the ladies who had stood from it, clearly not done with their lunches.

"So, he wants his money early? That's all Rita had to say?" Hermione watched Harry devour his first croissant in a perfect impersonation of Ron at dinner time.

Harry wiped his mouth. "Pretty much." He sipped his tea and looked at a point over her shoulder. Hermione frowned at him.

"What else, Harry."

His shoulders slumped. "Well, that evening he went on a date."

Hermione kept her face neutral. "Is that all?"

Harry studied her. "Yes. I guess we just didn't want you to read about all that and look at the pictures of them on your birthday." He stared longingly at his second croissant. Hermione noted that there were pictures.

"Well, I guess that was for the best. I had a lovely day until my fiancé decided to kiss me." She cut into her croissant, giving Harry the permission he needed to continue ravishing his plate. "So, he's been in a mood? Malfoy?"

With his mouth full, "He's been getting harassed all week."

"What do you mean?"

"Cards, flowers, resumes…all from potential wives. It's like mating season. Rita's article almost gave permission to court him. He's been setting fire to anything that enters his office with hearts on it."

"But that doesn't make sense," Hermione said. "He's been listed as an eligible bachelor for weeks. Why are these crazed Witches acting like this now?"

Harry swiftly finished his last bite, and while picking at the flakes left on the plate, said, "I guess if his inheritance was released to him on Saturday, then he could now marry a Half-Blood, a Muggle-born – Merlin even a Muggle! – and still receive the money. Lucius

couldn’t hold it hostage.” Harry leaned back in his chair, smiling. “*And* now he’s probably the richest unmarried Wizard of his age.”

“*If* the money was released to him.” She scratched off the top layer of the pastry with her fingernail.

“Right. *If*.”

Hermione quietly finished her croissant while Harry prattled on about work.

~*~

Once she'd ransacked all the rubbish bins at home, finding nothing, Hermione took the Floo to the *Daily Prophet* Headquarters, asking for the paper printed on her birthday, as a "memento." After the older dark skinned woman handed her the paper – holding her hand for longer than necessary, thanking her for all she did in the war – Hermione realized that the flash of blonde hair she'd seen on the front page had been Lucius Malfoy. She felt her breath leave her while staring at his face for the first time in a year and a half. The similarities with Draco were so striking, and even in his Azkaban robes, staring into her eyes through the paper, she still felt the cold chill of inferiority.

She arrived back at home and flipped through the article, landing on the photos of Draco's date. They had gone to dinner at one of the fancier Wizarding London cafés. She had wavy blonde hair and perfect teeth and Draco smirked at her. She was a Pureblood French girl according to Rita, which in Hermione's opinion would have not helped the case for all the Half-Bloods and Muggle-borns scrambling to be first in line. Rita did not even indicate in the article that Draco’s “preferences” had changed since the war, but basically gave a “Have at it!” to all ages, sizes, and births. It was quite encouraging if you were vapid enough to believe it.

Hermione noted that at no point did Rita confirm that the meeting was a success and the inheritance released. And she did not comment on the picture of Draco leaving Azkaban, head down, scowling, and jaw clenched.

~*~

On Friday, Hermione was wearing her sensible heels again. She really needed Ginny to take her shopping to find shoes that wouldn’t embarrass her, but today there was no time. She was speaking to the Wizengamot today regarding the sentencing of Antonin Dolohov.

According to Harry, the Wizengamot had been arguing for quite some time regarding the worst of the Death Eaters, particularly the ones who had been imprisoned before and had escaped. She’d heard rumblings through the office that a Dementor had been captured last week, and while Aiden liked to hypothesize the silliest things, Hermione knew that the timing with Dolohov’s trial was suspicious.

She held no pity for Dolohov, but if The Kiss was being reintroduced as a possibility, where did it end?

Hermione exited the lifts on the bottom floor, and stopped short when she spotted a blonde head twenty meters away. He was leaning against the stone wall and staring down at his shoes. She hadn't seen him since her mental break in lifts on Monday, but Rita Skeeter had kept his name in the papers. In fact, he had a lunch date with the same Bulgarian girl the day before. She smiled too much.

As far as she could tell, he had not noticed her yet, and she was so tempted to turn and head back upstairs. Her feet began to carry her toward him. He heard the clicking of her shoes and looked up at her. She saw for the smallest of moments a look of open curiosity before it was replaced with distrust.

"Malfoy," she greeted him, remembering that the last time they had truly spoken she had called him Draco.

"What are you doing here?" He squinted at her. She came to a stop about two meters from him.

"Providing information to the Wizengamot. Much like I assume you are?"

He clenched his jaw and glared at the floor again. When it was clear he would say no more, she settled herself against the opposite wall. Standing with him against his wall would have been awkward she assumed, but now she wished she had because they had to face each other from across a wide hallway. She focused her eyes on the oak door down the hall, craning her neck to keep him out of her line of sight.

"Tell me, Granger," he said, and she did her best to face him. He wasn't looking at her. "Do you make it a priority to free all of the Death Eaters?" She blinked at him, and he continued, "Is 'Testify on Behalf of the Accused' a standing Friday appointment in your calendar?"

He looked at her with the half-bored, half-annoyed expression that she'd seen so often on him. He was so warm to her last Friday, even buying her a drink, chatting with her. And there was something about her being golden…. It was as if she'd imagined all of it, and instead, they were still twelve years old on the Quidditch pitch.

"Actually, I am testifying *against* the accused today," she said, holding his stare. His eyes flickered, and she suspected that that was all she needed to say, but her mouth had a different idea. "Don't worry, Malfoy, you're still the exception to the rule." She raised a brow at him, like he always did to her.

"The exception…" He muttered and his eyes narrowed at the ground in between them. Then suddenly, "And who asked you to *save* me, Granger?" He stepped off the wall, neck and shoulders tense. She held her breath. "Because I didn't ask for your pity. I don't need a 'champion.'" He sneered at her. It reminded her so much of Hogwarts that she took a moment before she replied.

"I never volunteered to be your 'champion,'" Hermione scoffed.

He stepped into her.

“Then what is it you *are* volunteering for?” There was a glimmer in his eyes and a smirk hiding at the corner of his mouth. Hermione felt small and quiet, but mostly she felt hot. It was as if he’d flipped a switch somewhere and had changed the entire atmosphere of the hallway.

“N-nothing.” She focused on the disgusted look on her own face, trying to keep it there, trying to portray confusion. “Merlin, Malfoy! Can’t you just accept it when someone is nice to you? It … it was the right thing to do.”

The smirk slid off his lips, but his eyes were still gleaming. His pupils danced back and forth between her eyes with a determination she remembered from watching him during Arithmancy.

“So, is it a Life Debt, then?” he asked.

She no longer needed to pretend to be confused. “A Life Debt?”

“You saved me from a lifetime of rotting in Azkaban, so now I owe you, Granger? Is that how it works?”

Hermione was genuinely shocked. “No. No, that wasn’t my intention at all.” She shook her head and centered herself by looking down at the space between the tips of their shoes. Barely two strides. She swallowed. “If anything, Malfoy, a Debt is repaid.” She glanced up from beneath her lashes. He was squinting at her. “I meant what I said at your trial. If you had identified us at the Manor—“

“Stop!” he snapped and she jumped. “Stop glorifying that night.”

She jerked back from him, searching his face. He was glaring at her again. And he was flushed.

“I didn’t give a fig about saving the world, or stopping the Dark Lord – or you and your idiotic friends for that matter!” Part of his bangs fell forward onto his forehead and he shoved it back into place.

“I know you recognized me,” she said, shaking her head at him. “I know you saw me, saw Ron, and could have easily –“

“Handed you over to the Death Eaters? Would you have liked that Granger? Would it have cleared things up in your logical brain?”

“Of course not!” She almost laughed at the absurdity.

He shifted his weight so he could meet her at eye level, leaning toward her. Her back felt the cold of the stone wall just behind her. “Do you even know what they’re capable of? Dolohov? The Death Eaters?”

She squashed the slight joy at hearing him talk about the Death Eaters as if he were not a part

of them and straightened her spine.

“Clearly I do! You were in the room for it!” She couldn’t help but reach for her arm, still magically scarred with the word forever.

“Not Bella. The real Death Eaters.”

She didn’t understand. Something on her face must have told him so.

He continued, “Some of them are completely sane, with logical brains and the ability to dream up a future where Harry Potter and the Order are defeated, and Lord Voldemort reigns. And what do you think happens to people like you in this world, Granger?” His steel grey eyes drilled into hers, and the trace of that hidden smirk was back. He was winning at something. She just didn’t know what yet.

“I get it, Malfoy.” Hermione rolled her eyes, trying bravado. “We all get tortured. We all die. All Muggle-borns get a matching ‘Mudblood’ carving –“

“All the Muggle-borns, yes.” The glimmer was back in his eyes. He took another step toward her, and her back landed against the wall. “But not Potter’s ‘Golden Girl.’” She rankled at the term. “Or his Weasley slag for that matter.” She scowled at Ginny’s mention. He placed a hand on the wall beside her head, grinning at her, and all she could think about was how many times she had found him in a similar position with Pansy Parkinson while on Prefect rounds.

“You see,” he continued. “Macnair came up with the idea of the Auction. Brilliant business man he is.” He laughed lightly at some hidden joke only he knew, and Hermione felt his breath puff across her face.

“The Auction?” She blinked at him. He smirked at her.

“A way to sort of… divvy up the spoils of war. Whoever came into possession of certain Muggle-borns, Blood-traitors, or Order members at the end the of the war, would have first right to auction them off to the highest bidder… for whatever purpose they would like.”

Hermione’s chest felt hollow. She wasn’t breathing, but he kept going.

“And trust me, Granger.” He smiled at her. “It isn’t your housekeeping skills that they were after.”

She could feel the bile building in her throat while tears pricked her eyes. She cleared her throat.

“Then I assume thanks are still in order, Malfoy,” she bit out. “If you had identified me that night, ‘The Golden Girl’ would have belonged to Greyback and the Snatchers – theirs to auction. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to live out the rest of the war in the Malfoy dungeons! If you’re going to become a ‘spoil of war,’ best to do it in style!” She spat his words back at him and saw her breath sweep the hair that had fallen on his forehead again.

“Oh, you’re very welcome, Granger,” he hissed at her. “After all, I’ve heard that Greyback wasn’t so interested in waiting for the Auction. He preferred to *keep* all of his ‘spoils.’”

She could feel the heat dancing up her neck and across her jaw. She swallowed and held his cruel eyes. “And, of course, being the shrewd business man that you are, that wouldn’t do. Why let Greyback have me when you could use the opportunity to make a few hundred galleons after the war. Is that it, Malfoy?”

He laughed, and the sound rattled her ribs. “A few hundred galleons? Come now, Granger, you must know that your… *skills* would have been worth much more than that. You would have been the top prize.”

“Stop,” she hissed at him.

“Bidding for you and the Weasley girl actually started at 10,000 galleons each, but I had it on good authority that the highest bid discussed was 20,000 for the ginger –“

“You’re disgusting.” She needed to get out before she cried. She started to step around him, away from the wall, but he pinned her in with his other arm.

“—And 30,000 galleons for the Brightest Witch of Our Age.”

Her breath left her lungs with a small laugh. He was smiling smugly at her, teasing her, watching her.

“You can’t be serious,” she said. She was going to cry or be sick or both. And none of those things did she want to do in front of him.

“And let’s not forget my favorite part.” He brought his face closer to hers, if it was even possible. “Another 5,000 would be added on if it could be proven that you were ‘untouched.’”

Her lungs were begging for air, but she could not cooperate.

“So, tell me, Granger. I’ve been curious,” he whispered. “Had events played out differently last spring, could I be 35,000 galleons richer?”

Her hand moved before her brain did. She slapped him. Her dirty blood was screaming in her veins and she was panting. His face barely moved as she connected, but she’d gotten him good. They glared into each other’s eyes.

“Mr. Malfoy,” a voice a thousand miles away called. “They are ready for you.”

He straightened, and as he turned to face the oak doors, she turned on her heel and headed back to the lifts. She took them to the Atrium. Her heels clicked towards the first fireplace on the right, she spoke her Floo address as the dust hit the flames, and when Ginny jumped off the couch, spilling her popcorn on the floor, Hermione proceeded straight to the loo as her stomach heaved.

Ginny sat with her on the bathroom floor for the next several hours, without comment.

~*~

She dreamt that night of Malfoy Manor. She was lying on the drawing room floor, memorizing the chandelier and the patterns the light made on the ceiling. Something was tugging on her arm but she couldn't see.

"Where did you get the sword?" A hiss.

"We found it - I swear." Her voice floated to her ears. She did not remember speaking.

"You're a liar, aren't you, Granger."

The pain in her arm. Her voice screaming. And she looked to her left and Draco Malfoy was carving the word "Mudblood" into her arm.

Ginny was there when she woke up, sweating.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Ginny spent the whole night on the bathroom floor with her, comforting her the best she could, but every time Hermione looked at her, she felt Draco's breath against her face as he told her how much her best friend was worth to the Death Eaters. She wouldn't let her brain focus for too long on that number, or else the number 35,000 would flicker across her eyelids.

On the night in question, she had been "untouched," as Draco called it. She was still untouched. She and Ron had never gotten far enough in their relationship before he took off for Ireland and she left for Hogwarts. So, there would have been some sort of a test to see if she was still a virgin? She clamped down on the gates of her mind before she could imagine a world where the Auction took place.

She always assumed that if Harry lost the war, she would have already died on the battlefield, or else she would have gone down fighting after his death. She never imagined what would have happened to her if she survived the battle.

Ginny had surmised that she was distraught over something to do with Draco pretty early on, but she didn't play her game, digging for information. She just sat with her on the bathroom floor all night, conjuring a blanket and pillow whenever Hermione started nodding off, crying, dreaming. It wasn't until around three in the morning that Hermione could speak to her. She told her about the Wizengamot dungeons. About how cold he was until suddenly he snapped. She told her pieces that she had forgotten by now, pieces that still did not make sense to her – he accused her of wanting to "save" him, he accused her of creating a Life Debt, he…

Ginny watched her stutter. "What?"

"I think he came on to me." Hermione's brows stitched together as she tried to remember.

I never volunteered to be your 'champion.'

*Then what is it you **are** volunteering for?*

"Really?" Ginny waited.

“Don’t get too excited,” Hermione scoffed. She adjusted her position on the floor. “I probably misread it.”

Ginny watched her carefully, but asked her to continue. Hermione told her how quickly it all shifted downhill. When she got to the Auction, she left Ginny out of it. She didn’t want that to sit on her friend’s shoulders. When Ginny heard the amount 30,000 galleons, her eyebrows shot up and her jaw dropped.

“I—I can’t…. Hermione, that can’t be real. He has to be messing with you.”

“The Auction?”

“Oh, no, I’m sure the Auction was actually discussed, those sick fucks,” Ginny said, waving her hand. Hermione thought it odd that Ginny took it so well when *she* had been up all night vomiting over it. “It’s the amount. Who has 30,000 galleons lying around for that kind of thing!”

“Pure-blood aristocrats?” Hermione shrugged, sipping from the water glass Ginny had conjured for her.

“That can’t have been the amount. He’s exaggerating or made it up on the spot to torture you.” Ginny huffed.

“It’s an oddly specific amount to ‘make up,’” Hermione said. “He also said 5,000 galleons would be added on if I was a virgin.”

Ginny pulled her eyes from the bathroom cabinets she was frowning at to look at Hermione with wide eyes. “He said that to you?”

“If it could be proven that I was ‘untouched’ they would pay more for me.” Hermione felt like saying this out loud to her should make her cry or vomit again, but she supposed she was a bit numb to it now.

“What brought this up?” Ginny said. Hermione looked up from her glass of water to see Ginny’s eyes sparkling.

“It was… a part of his stream of consciousness, I suppose.”

“But he’s saying these awful things to you, and you… what?” Ginny searched her eyes for something.

“I was trying to get out. I was about to throw up on him.” Hermione laughed a little at that horrible thought.

“Get out?” Ginny asked.

“Yes, he had me pinned. And every time I tried to leave he’d block my path.” Hermione shuddered at the memory of his eyes and the hot puff of his breath. Hermione looked up when Ginny said no more. Ginny’s face was oddly bright, but she wasn’t smiling. “What?”

“So,” Ginny began. “He’s teasing you about your virginity as he’s pressing you up against a wall?”

Hermione frowned. “You make it sound very juvenile.”

“It *is* very juvenile.” Ginny nodded. “It sounds like the two of you never left Hogwarts.”

Hermione shook her head and looked at the rug she was sitting on. It hadn’t *felt* juvenile in the moment. It had felt terrifying.

“I guess it only supports your point that I slapped him, too?” She looked up at Ginny with a shy smile.

This sent Ginny over the moon, and she laughed and begged for more information, and for the first time in twenty-four hours Hermione felt proud of herself.

~*~

She almost called in sick to Cornerstone on Saturday morning, but she was at least grateful that she would not be seeing Draco. She supposed he might be cruel enough to show his face after their conversation yesterday. She really had no idea to what lengths he would go anymore. And she probably had never known.

She checked the reserved requests first thing that morning to make sure there were none under Black or Malfoy. As the shop opened and the hag shuffled in, she was able to put yesterday behind her.

Cornerstone was surprisingly busy that day, with almost always a line of two people at the register, so when a large gentleman with a mustache bid her a good day and moved away from the register, Hermione was completely thrown to see Narcissa Malfoy in the doorway.

Narcissa’s eyes roved over the stacks before landing on her. Frozen in place, Hermione’s ears started burning. Merlin, she had slapped her son yesterday. Was Narcissa Malfoy here to request that she please keep her filthy Muggle-born hands off her precious pure-blood heir?

Narcissa Malfoy smiled.

Hermione blinked.

“Miss Granger,” she said. Her voice dripped like honey out of a bottle. “Good morning.”

Hermione watched Narcissa Malfoy ascend the two steps to the main landing, smiling at her.

“Mrs. Malfoy,” Hermione croaked. “Good morning.”

“Draco did tell me that you had a weekend job here.” Narcissa Malfoy floated to the counter and placed a delicate hand on it. “I love this shop. It’s so much nicer to be out of the way of the bustle of Diagon Alley, don’t you think?”

Hermione swallowed. “Yes, absolutely. I feel the same way.”

“I believe Draco spent several of his summers at this shop, reading and escaping the rush of the market.” Narcissa waved her hand and shook her head, smiling still. “You must have run into him here before, yes?” Narcissa’s eyes flickered for a moment, just as her son’s did. She wanted a specific answer…

“I- Um, no, actually. We never saw each other here before… before a few weeks ago.” Hermione placed her hands on the counter and immediately brought them back down. “What brings you in to Cornerstone today?” She held her breath, waiting for the ball to drop –

“The book on the Goblin Wars,” Narcissa said.

Hermione’s brows lifted. A book? Not “the handprint you left on my son’s cheek” or “the silly infatuation you have with my son”? A book? She came to a bookstore for the purpose of a book?

“Yes?” Hermione said. “Did you need to return it?”

“I loved it,” Narcissa said. She grinned at her. “Draco told me it was a favorite of yours as well?”

Draco… did what?

“I – Well, yes. I do love that author—“

“I was hoping you could point me to another book of hers or a similar title.”

“I – Yes, I can absolutely – um,” Hermione stammered. She began to move around the counter, then remembered that she had left the ledger open on the counter. “I will… just let me…” She doubled back and tucked the ledger into a drawer. “Yes. Alright. Follow me, please.”

Hermione rounded the counter, praying that Narcissa Malfoy did not now think she was ill in the head. She could hear the click of dragon leather heels behind her as she stumbled to the stacks to the left of the entrance, just now remembering that she was wearing trainers, Muggle jeans, and a T-shirt of a Muggle music group. She stopped in front of the M’s.

“Alright, so, Mattie McHandry has also written similar non-fictions with regard to the Centaur and Elvish histories, and she should be coming out with a Werewolf book later this year –“

“I’ll take both. And please place an order for me for the third when it comes out.”

Hermione looked over her shoulder at Narcissa Malfoy. She had a pleasant smile on her lips, and a plan behind her eyes.

“Of course, Mrs. Malfoy. Excellent choices.” Hermione grabbed the Centaur book and reached for the Elf book. It hit her that Narcissa Malfoy was about to purchase a book about house-elf repression and the role wizards have played. It was like a broomstick collision that you couldn’t look away from. “Was there anything else you were looking for today?”

“I think that should satisfy me for a few weeks now. Thank you.” Narcissa Malfoy pulled a lock of silky hair behind her ear.

Hermione walked the books back to the register to bag them.

“Shall I put these on the family account, Mrs. Malfoy?”

“Yes, dear. Thank you.”

“And I have the pre-order ledger here,” Hermione said, pulling a notepad from the bottom drawer. “I will list you for the McHandry Werewolf book.”

“Do you work both Saturday and Sunday, Miss Granger?”

Hermione looked up into Narcissa’s clear eyes. They were bluer than Draco’s grey, but just as intense.

“Yes, I do. Every weekend. Ten in the morning until six at night.” She finished writing Narcissa’s order on the list, and placed the notepad back in the bottom drawer.

“And with a Ministry job on the weekdays? You must keep yourself very busy,” Narcissa said. She hadn’t taken her eyes off Hermione. She began to wonder if she had ink on her face.

“I- Yes, I do. I suppose I’ve always kept busy.” Hermione had the bag ready to hand to Narcissa, but she didn’t want to seem like she was dismissing her in the middle of a conversation.

“It must be very hard for you and Mr. Weasley to see each other, with you both having such different schedules.” Narcissa’s eyes flickered. Hermione couldn’t blink.

“I-I guess so. Harry and I do miss him while he’s away, but Ron is accomplishing so much for himself in Ireland.” Hermione swallowed.

“Do you get to visit him much?” Narcissa twitched her head to the side, examining her.

“Ron?” Hermione felt like there was an answer she was supposed to be giving. “No, I haven’t made it out to Ireland yet.” And suddenly it became clear. *Miss Granger visits her beloved in Ireland every weekend.* Narcissa was digging. For whatever reason. Hermione added, “I believe Ron keeps himself… quite busy as well.”

Narcissa’s lips twitched. “I see.” She took a breath. “Well, I thank you very much for your assistance today Miss Granger.”

“Not at all.” Hermione handed Narcissa the bag. There was something behind her eyes, some sort of approval. “We hope to see you at Cornerstone again very soon, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Narcissa’s delicate fingers took the bag. “Please, dear, call me Narcissa.” She smiled at her. Hermione blinked.

Narcissa turned and glided out, not making a sound.

~*~

That afternoon Morty came downstairs as she was closing up. He was a tall and thin man with a grey mustache that twitched as he talked. Hermione thought he was just the loveliest gentleman.

“Good evening, Morty,” she chirped.

“Miss Granger, you are to take the afternoon off tomorrow.”

A book slipped from her hands as she was filing it. “I’m sorry?” She turned to look at Morty.

“I received this note this afternoon.” He pulled a thick parchment paper from his breast pocket. “It requests that you be given the afternoon off. And I couldn’t agree more.”

“I- I still don’t understand,” Hermione said. Was she being let go?

“And a note for you arrived with it.” Morty pulled an envelope from his pocket that perfectly matched the parchment he had. It had a slanted and even cursive on the front.

Miss Hermione Granger
c/o Mortimer Hindes
Cornerstone Books
Horizont Alley & Diagon Alley

Hermione opened the thick envelope and found matching script on the note.

Dear Miss Granger,

Please do me the honor of sitting down to afternoon tea with me tomorrow. I would greatly love your company. I have asked Mr. Hindes to cover the shop for you.

Yours,
Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione reread the note four times. She was torn between shock that Narcissa would be bold enough to ask a business owner to alter his schedule for her, and terror that she would be sitting down to tea with Narcissa Malfoy tomorrow. The terror was winning.

“I had no idea you were such close friends with Mrs. Malfoy. She’s been a loyal customer for years now.” Morty took off his glasses to clean them.

“N-no I’m not.” Hermione folded up the note. “We are merely acquaintances.”

“Well, that’s definitely a good acquaintance to have.”

“I suppose so.”

Hermione headed to Eeylops Owl Emporium after work to send a response to Narcissa Malfoy. By the time she’d arrived home, a grand grey owl was pecking at her glass. She

would be sitting down to tea at Malfoy Manor at 4PM tomorrow.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all so much for the responses to this story. It's my first fanfic, so it's very encouraging. Thank you again. Enjoy Tea!

At five minutes ‘til four, Morty came downstairs and started picking up the register for her.

“Let me just, um…” Hermione grabbed a few volumes that she had pulled off the shelves for a gentleman earlier that morning.

“Ah-ah-ah—“ Morty clucked. He took the books from her. “I think I know where they go,” he said, raising a brow. “Besides. Do you really want to be *late* to tea with Narcissa Malfoy?”

Hermione looked at the clock. Three minutes ‘til four. No, she supposed being late to tea would be worse than tea at all. But standing her up all together….

“Off with you!” Morty said, reading her mind. “I’ve opened my Floo upstairs, so you can head straight to the Manor.”

Hermione’s heart jumped. “Alright,” she said, grabbing her bag. “But I haven’t finished updating the ledger. So be sure to add –“

“Got it. Goodbye.” Morty waved her away.

Hermione slumped and headed upstairs. Morty's sweet wife, Maggie, let her into their flat and gave her the Floo powder. She was tempted to start a conversation with Maggie to delay the process, but Maggie waved and disappeared into their kitchen.

Hermione checked her reflection in the mirror on the mantle. She had actually *asked* Ginny to work with her hair today. She didn't let her do makeup, but Ginny had pulled it back into the

braid she'd done a few weeks ago as she filled Hermione in on Quidditch practice the day before, telling her that Draco had been irritable and distracted. Good. Then Hermione had found something suitable to wear that was not made of denim, but then again, what could possibly be "suitable" to wear to afternoon tea at Malfoy Manor. Hermione had settled on a skirt borrowed from Ginny, and a blouse borrowed from the back of her own closet.

Hermione took a breath. She grabbed a handful of Floo powder and whispered, "Malfoy Manor" as the flames turned green.

She stepped out of an opulent fireplace. White marble everywhere. She had been a bit distracted the last time she'd been to Malfoy Manor, so seeing it again, as a guest, was stunning. She was not in the drawing room, thankfully. It was not until stepping through the fireplace that Hermione realized that she might be having tea with Narcissa Malfoy in the same room her sister tortured her. She wondered what the spell was for cleaning blood out of the carpets.

Just as she was finishing admiring the hall, a tiny house-elf rounded a corner and tottered toward her.

"Miss Hermione Granger?"

"Yes, hello." Hermione smiled thinking of the house-elf history book sitting on Narcissa Malfoy's settee.

"Will you please come with Mippy?" The tiny girl elf curtsied for her, then turned to lead her away.

Mippy lead her down the hall past a grand staircase that Hermione tried not to recognize. She passed busts of past Malfoy men, all with the same grey eyes, ending with Lucius. She shivered at the likeness. Mippy paused at a pair of doors. She knocked twice and then entered, opening the doors wide for Hermione.

"Miss Hermione Granger to see you ma'am."

Narcissa Malfoy was bathed in sunlight streaming in from the western windows. The rays bounced off her long hair and spread over the room. She stood from her chair as Hermione entered, and Hermione felt like she was being welcomed to Mount Olympus by Hera herself.

"Miss Granger." Narcissa floated to her. She extended her hand and Hermione took it. "I'm so grateful that you were able to come to tea today." Narcissa clasped her other hand around Hermione's and looked deeply into her eyes. "I do so want the opportunity to get to know you better."

"I- Yes, thank you. I agree. It would be so lovely to get to know you as well." Hermione smiled and found she couldn't blink.

"Was Mortimer able to cover your shift?" Narcissa released her hand and lead her to the cushioned chairs. She glided into her chair, and Hermione tried to replicate the motion.

"Yes, he was very kind to allow this. He's really a great man." Hermione crossed her legs at the ankles, instead of at the knees like the Muggles do. "Both he and Maggie are wonderful people." She opened her mouth to ask Narcissa how long she'd been patronizing Cornerstone, but stopped as she took in the room for the first time. She wasn't sure how she'd missed it, but they were having tea in the Malfoy personal library.

"Oh, my," Hermione muttered while spinning in her chair to see the stacks upon stacks of tomes and old volumes. Malfoy Manor's library was cited as one of the oldest and most expansive libraries in all of Wizarding England, but of course when Hermione read this in her second year, she never imagined she would get to see it one day. Everything was immaculately dusted and cared for, and there was even a catalog near the door that would assist you with any topic you desired.

"Oh, yes," Narcissa said. "I hope you don't mind leaving Cornerstone's books for ours. Our drawing room is being renovated."

"No, no. I'm absolutely floored. Your library is beautiful Mrs. Malfoy." Her eyes danced along the spines, finding what she thought might be a first edition of *Moste Potente Potions* tucked in between two heavy volumes.

"Please, dear, call me Narcissa."

And just like that, Hermione was brought back to the oddity that was tea with Narcissa Malfoy.

"Narcissa. Your library is beautiful." Hermione smiled. She wondered what to do with her hands, so she just let them lay awkwardly on her lap.

"Thank you, dear. You will have to come by just to browse one day. Any book you would like to borrow, it's yours." Narcissa waved her arm and Mippy appeared with the tea service before Hermione's brain could process the idea of browsing the Malfoy library.

Mippy pushed over a cart with the most decadent looking sandwiches and scones. Mippy snapped and the teacups and saucers were produced from thin air. She laid them down on the table between Hermione and Narcissa. Hermione was entranced, but of course cautious when it came to house-elf servitude.

“Tell me, Miss Granger.” Hermione looked up and Narcissa was watching her. “You work at Cornerstone Books on the weekends, but during the week you work at the Ministry?”

“Yes. At the Department of Magical Creatures, in the Beast Division.”

“Fascinating.” And she actually looked fascinated. “And what does the Beast Division entail? Werewolves and Centaurs, yes?”

“Yes, the Centaur Liaison office, the Werewolf Registry. But also the Ghoul Task Force and the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau, which is where I spend most of my time.” She watched as Mippy poured their tea and set small plates in front of them.

“Thank you Mippy,” Narcissa said, and Mippy disappeared. “Dragon research? That must be quite interesting.” She poured milk into her cup and began stirring without a single “clink” against the teacup edge.

“Yes, it is. I analyze and write reports on dragon eggs found around Wizarding England, and I’ve requested to head my own research project on Gringotts, actually. You see, up until a year and a half ago, there was a blinded dragon chained in the bowels of the building, used as a security method for the more important vaults. They tortured the dragon to respond to certain sounds and…” Hermione realized that it is possible Narcissa knew everything about this dragon, as it was her sister’s vault they had broken into. “And I would like to help the goblins come up with an alternative, so another dragon is not tortured in this way.”

Hermione focused on pouring milk into her tea.

“That is quite honorable Miss Granger. Our family has such a long history with dragons and I cannot tell you how many stories I’ve heard about the creatures being used for wizards’ own ends.” Narcissa shook her head. “Well, you must keep me updated on that project. I do hope you have the proper support you need.”

“I—yes, thank you. I’m just at the beginning, so I look forward to where it goes.” Hermione added three spoonfuls of honey to her cup and began stirring.

“Do you know, my son takes his tea the exact same way. What a coincidence,” Narcissa said. Hermione looked up at her and she was smiling. “Milk and three spoons of honey.”

“How strange.” Hermione neglected to inform her that she, of course, knew how Draco took his tea and, as a coffee addict by age thirteen, she had tried “Draco’s way” when she was forced to drink tea. She lifted the cup to take a sip. Quite delicious in comparison to Ginny’s breakfast tea.

“Do you run into him at work often?”

Hermione looked at her over her teacup. “Dr-Draco?” There was no getting around saying his given name there. She couldn’t very well call him “Malfoy” in this house. She stuttered, “Yes, I – I mean, not very much. I’ve seen him in the lifts.” She set the cup down, and blocked the memory of his hot breath on her cheek from a few days before. “He seems to be getting on well?”

“Yes, I do believe so. He is quite glad to have befriended Mr. Potter and yourself.”

Hermione suppressed a laugh. “I can only imagine how difficult it must be for him to change the public view of himself.” Hermione took a sip before she said anything else.

“But I’m sure you know exactly what he is going through, Miss Granger.”

Hermione looked at her. Her eyes were kind.

Narcissa continued, “As a Muggle-born child entering a pure-blood world, I believe you worked *very* hard at changing opinions.”

Hermione waited for the other shoe to drop, but there was silence. Narcissa Malfoy had just recognized her as a witch who had fought for her rightful place against those who'd dismissed her in the pure-blood world, including herself. Hermione felt a knot in her throat, blocking her breath.

"Yes, I did. I tried very hard to catch up." She set her cup down, clanking against the saucer. She very much wished to talk about something else before she cried in front of Narcissa Malfoy for no reason whatsoever. So, of course, she chose the other topic she wished not to discuss. "I'm sure Draco and the others found me quite irritating that first year." And every year after.

"Oh, how he would rant about you." Narcissa laughed. Hermione nodded and reached for a scone to keep her hands busy. "He would write to me, 'Mother, that Granger girl has stolen my favorite table in the library.' Or 'Mother, that Granger girl has cheated on her end of year exams, I know she did.'"

Hermione smiled at Narcissa's polite editing. She was sure "that Granger girl" was not what Draco had called her.

"I have to admit, I aimed to score evenly with Draco. That was always my goal."

"Well, I'm sure your parents are quite proud of you and the name you have carved out for yourself. What do they do in the Muggle world?"

Narcissa plucked a scone from the tray and served herself some jam as well.

"Well, they are both dentists. They fix teeth."

"Oh, how interesting," she said. "And what part of England do they live in?"

"They… Well, they actually live in Australia at the moment."

Hermione was able to dodge any further specifics about her parents and her current non-relationship with them. Narcissa asked her if she had any siblings, how her parents reacted when she received her Hogwarts letter, if she had experienced any magical outbursts before, etc. They kept a nice conversation for almost another half an hour. Hermione wasn't quite sure how it happened, but Narcissa turned the conversation back to Draco at one point.

"Draco has very much enjoyed playing Quidditch again. I must thank you and Mr. Potter for allowing him to join the Ministry's league." Narcissa placed her empty cup and saucer on the side table, and Mippy appeared immediately to pour her another cup.

"Oh, that's all Harry, really. I don't play in the league. Riding a broom was never my strong suit."

Mippy poured Hermione a second cup as well and disappeared before she could say thank you. It wasn't until that very moment that Hermione noticed that Mippy was wearing an apron.

“I must admit, Quidditch was never my passion either. You must have been dragged along to all sorts of practices and matches at Hogwarts.”

Hermione shook the questions of Mippy’s apron from her head and focused on Narcissa. “Oh, yes. I had to support Harry, Ginny, and Ron at every game. Usually I’d bring a book.” Hermione laughed lightly and brought her cup to her lips.

“Yes, I remember Draco telling me that.” Narcissa smiled. Hermione’s cup stopped at her lips. “He’d write home saying ‘Mother, that Granger girl doesn’t even watch the match when she’s in the stands. I look down and she’s reading a book.’”

Narcissa laughed, a sound like twinkling lights, but Hermione paused. Maybe she was a footnote in a story about the match, and in his rambling about losing to Harry, he’d add in other things he found annoying. Maybe?

Narcissa was smiling at her, so she took a sip and placed her cup down. “I – I wouldn’t have thought anyone was paying any mind to me, though it is satisfying to think that somehow I might have distracted the other team’s Seeker, allowing Harry to score!” Hermione joked.

Narcissa chuckled. “Distracted indeed.”

Before she could fully process the conversation at hand, the opening of the library doors caused Hermione’s teacup to rattle in its saucer.

“Mother.” A drawl. And then Draco Malfoy was peeking his head around the door. “You wanted to see me?”

Hermione held her breath. She blinked before the number 35,000 could flash before her eyes. She begged whichever gods were listening that he would leave the room without noticing her there.

“Draco! Home already?” Narcissa beamed.

He stepped fully into the room. She gripped her teacup so hard she thought it would break.

“Yes, I was out with –“ And his gaze landed on her. She felt the heat from his body two days ago, trapping her against the stone wall, and she could smell his breath as he smiled cruelly at her. She begged her watering eyes not to shut or look away.

He had frozen in place, seeing her there. And then his eyes flickered, slowly looking at his mother. The disdain she had feared from him was now directed at Narcissa. Hermione was confused.

“Draco, dear,” Narcissa said, “I invited Hermione to tea today. Didn’t I tell you?”

Narcissa was gazing intently at him. Draco blinked and his lips tightened.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Please join us, Draco.” Narcissa’s request had a tone of finality. Hermione started to panic.

“I-I actually do need to be off.” Hermione set her teacup down with a clank. “I should really see if Morty needs any help closing the shop.” She turned to Narcissa. “Thank you so much for having me over for tea. I have truly enjoyed your company.”

Narcissa was annoyed, Hermione could tell. As she stood and grabbed her bag from the floor, Narcissa stood.

“What a shame that you must leave so soon. I would love to find another time to continue our conversation.”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I would love that.” She didn’t dare look at the figure standing still in the center of the room. “And again, thank you very much for inviting me to tea.”

“Of course, dear.” Narcissa smiled at her. “Draco, will you please escort Hermione to the fireplaces?”

Hermione looked to Draco, eyes wide, and found him still glaring at his mother. His jaw was clenched.

“I—That’s very kind, but I’m sure I can find my way back to –“

“Oh, nonsense.” Narcissa waved her hand. “It’s no trouble, is it Draco?” Narcissa locked eyes with Draco. Hermione wondered if they had an ability to speak telepathically with each other, because she was clearly missing something.

Draco straightened. “Not at all.” Draco turned and walked to the library doors, holding one open for her.

Hermione turned to Narcissa. “Thank you again Mrs. Malfoy. It has been a pleasure.” Hermione watched her feet as they carried her across the carpeted floor to a pair of dragon leather shoes.

“Hermione, dear,” Narcissa called to her. Hermione turned to find Narcissa smiling. “Please call me Narcissa.”

Hermione’s face felt hot, and she didn’t know why, but she felt embarrassed to be so familiar with Draco’s mother without his consent. She didn’t dare look at him as she smiled to Narcissa, turned and headed out of the room first. She faced the bust of Lucius Malfoy, and as his son closed the door behind her, she looked at Draco quickly. His face was as cold and stony as the line of Malfoys they passed.

Draco led her down the hall without a sound. She could hear her footsteps, but not his. He led her past the grand staircase and into the hall with three fireplaces for arriving guests.

A loud clank from behind a closed door to her right. A hum of magic. Hermione jumped and held her breath. She hadn’t noticed that door before.

“Renovations.”

She looked up at Draco. He was looking at a point over her shoulder. She remembered Narcissa now saying that the drawing room was being renovated. Was she now just outside the room where Draco's silence had bought him a potential 35,000 galleons? Just beyond that door would she find house elves cleaning the crashed chandelier and the stain of her dirty blood on the stone?

He offered her the bag of Floo powder, and without looking at him she tossed the dust into the fireplace, whispering her destination, and disappeared.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> I'm so overwhelmed by all of the comments on this story. Thanks so much you guys. I love reading your ideas and commentary.

Of course, weeks ago, when Hermione had only wanted a daily *glimpse* of Draco to keep her eyes satisfied, she never saw him during the week at the Ministry. Now that she would rather be slowly devoured by a Manticore than share a lift with him, that was all she did.

She saw him in the lifts twice on Monday, thankfully with others hopping on and off. Then she just managed to evade him at the café, but only by turning around and choosing to starve. Tuesday had her running to the café half an hour before lunch to grab one of those blasted croissants that Harry had gotten her addicted to, only to find that he had the same intention. They made eye contact this time, so she had no choice but to go to the counter and order while he sat at a corner table, possibly watching her. She then took the croissant and ate at her desk.

On Wednesday, Harry and a few other Aurors apprehended a man trying to smuggle a dragon egg into London, and seeing as Draco did paperwork and consulting for the Auror Office, and the Auror Office needed to collaborate with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures on this case, and Hermione accepted and prepared reports for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and Aiden was out sick that day…. A memo arrived on her desk with perfectly curved lettering that she recognized immediately. And that's how she found herself essentially "passing notes" with Draco for the remainder of the week.

She finally penned a note to Harry on Thursday afternoon – after she had asked Draco for as much information as possible on the physical attributes of the egg itself, and his memo back to her read "It was shaped like an egg." – asking Harry politely if there was possibly anyone else who she could correspond with on this case.

On Friday, the mailroom tray delivered an envelope addressed to *Miss Hermione Granger* in a slanted cursive she now knew.

Miss Granger,

I'd like to invite you to have a look around our library and borrow any books you take an interest in. Any day after work next week or next weekend is fine. Please let me know your preference.

Yours,
Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione sighed and placed her head in her hands. How had she gotten to be such good friends with Narcissa Malfoy?

~*~

Hermione chose the following Saturday evening. She told Narcissa that she had errands to run after she closed up at Cornerstone, so she wouldn't be able to arrive until 7:30PM, if that was alright with her. That way, she would arrive after dinner so Narcissa could not invite her to sit with them, just in case Draco was home. Which she also assumed he would not be, as he had a very active social life, according to Rita Skeeter, and should not be at home at 7:30 on a Saturday evening eating dinner with his mother. She hoped.

At ten minutes to six, Hermione was thinking of what she could do for an hour and a half, seeing as she, of course, had no errands to run. She then realized that she could bring Narcissa a gift for inviting her over… and then realized that she probably should have done this the first time Narcissa invited her over. Hermione slapped her forehead and closed her eyes. What a commoner she was.

After spending ten minutes thinking of gifts to bring, she finally settled on bringing Narcissa a book, as she was going to be taking a book (or five) from her. She sent Morty a quick Patronus, letting him know that she would be doing some personal shopping after the store closed if that was alright with him.

Hermione settled on a Mattie McHandry fiction novel that was written before the author began writing on goblin and elf histories. She added the sickles to the drawer and made the note in the ledger, before closing the store properly and Apparating home.

Ginny was out with Harry, so she was on her own for her hair – a fact she only realized when she saw herself in the mirror. She tried clipping some of it back, away from her face. Hopefully it was only Narcissa tonight.

She grabbed the Floo powder and spoke "Malfoy Manor" at 7:30 on the dot. She popped through the fireplace and Narcissa Malfoy was waiting for her with a smile.

"Hello, Narcissa."

“Welcome, Hermione. I hope you had enough time to run your errands?”

Hermione fumbled momentarily with her small purse and the wrapped book in her arms. “Yes, I – one moment.” She shifted her belongings. “Actually, I brought this for you.” She extended the book to Narcissa, and her smile became even more genuine, if possible.

“How lovely, Hermione. But, you didn’t need to do that.” She unwrapped the gift and read the cover, finding the author’s name. “Another McHandry book!” She looked to Hermione.

“Yes, it’s a fiction though. Before she started her history series.” Arms now empty, Hermione let one arm hang dead at her side, not sure what she was supposed to do with it.

“I can’t wait to read it. Thank you, Hermione.” Narcissa waved and Mippy appeared, curtseyed at Hermione, and took the book and the wrapping paper before disappearing. Hermione noted that she wore a little dress today. “Shall we go to the library?”

“Yes, thank you.” Hermione smiled. “And thank you so much for offering your books to me.” She began to follow Narcissa down the hall. “I have to admit, I have been curious about the Malfoy library for many years.”

“Well, then consider this the first of many visits.” Narcissa’s teeth were quite straight.

Narcissa placed delicate hands on the doors to the library and they seemed to open at her touch. Hermione was shocked again at how vast the room was, with the sun setting through the western windows lighting the stacks and shelves, the smell. Hermione was feeling greedy just standing on the threshold.

"Can I interest you in a cup of tea while I show you around?" Narcissa spun to face her, golden hair floating momentarily.

“I would love that, thank you,” Hermione said.

Mippy appeared without even being called. She held a tray with two cups and saucers.

“Miss likes milk and three honey spoons?” Mippy’s bright eyes batted up at her. Mippy was wearing a top hat with a little flower in it.

“I – yes, thank you, Mippy.” Hermione smiled down at her and Mippy handed her a cup and saucer.

Narcissa took hers and thanked Mippy, and then Mippy disappeared again. Hermione stared at the spot she had previously occupied. She took the plunge.

“Narcissa, forgive me if this question is impertinent, but I’ve been wondering if Mippy is a free elf.”

Narcissa looked at her over the top of her teacup. She quirked her lips. “She is indeed.”

And just like that, Hermione felt even more drawn to Narcissa Malfoy.

Narcissa continued, “After I was released from custody last summer, almost all of our assets had been frozen, our house-elves relocated, and all dark objects seized. I came home to a lonely house, but Mippy greeted me at the fireplace.” Narcissa smiled softly. “She had hidden and stayed behind, waiting for me to come home. I told her I couldn’t keep her on, as Malfoy Manor is now forbidden to house-elf servitude, so she pointed to the glove I was holding and asked me to free her. She’s been with me ever since. I put fifty galleons into a Gringotts vault every week for her, and I suspect she spends it on clothes and hats.”

Narcissa laughed and sipped her tea. Hermione’s eyes were watering, so she did the same.

“That’s very generous of you, Narcissa. I’m sure Mippy appreciates the opportunity to continue serving you and your family.”

“Thank you, dear. Now let me show you around!” Narcissa spun to the shelves on her left, and Hermione’s heart skipped at the idea of browsing this library.

She took her over to the catalogue at the front of the room, explaining that she need only speak any kind of title, author, or genre, and fairy lights would appear to guide you to those texts. She led her over to the fiction section, showing her where the first editions were.

Hermione spotted several red volumes that she recognized. "Is that the Lance Gainsworth series, the *Undesirables*?"

"Yes, they're signed copies," Narcissa replied, and Hermione's fingers itched. "I do love that series. Is it a favorite of yours as well?"

"Absolutely," Hermione said. "He's currently my favorite fiction author."

"Draco loved the *Undesirable* series. They were the only books he requested while he was awaiting trial for that year."

Hermione blinked. "The *Undesirable* series?"

Narcissa nodded.

"All seven books, or just a few?"

"All of them. I think he's read that series about four or five times all the way through." Narcissa reached out and touched the books lovingly.

Hermione frowned. Why would he lie to her about something as trivial as books? Not that books were trivial to *her*--

"What's the matter, dear?" Narcissa must have seen the frown on her face.

"Oh, I-- It's nothing. He told me he wasn't a fan of the books." Hermione tried nonchalance and looked elsewhere at the other stacks.

"Probably just toying with you, I'm sure." Narcissa chuckled and searched Hermione's face.

Toying with her. She wasn't sure she liked that, now knowing about his intentions of selling her like cattle that night. Worse than cattle...

She looked at Narcissa and she was watching her, so she smiled back and quickly looked at the ground.

“Well, I will leave you to browse, dear. And, please do take whatever you’d like.”

“Thank you Narcissa. You are very kind.” Hermione still couldn’t believe that she would have free run of the Malfoy library for the next… half an hour? Hour? She looked at the grandfather clock in the corner as Narcissa slipped through the door. It was ten minutes to eight. She would try her hardest to be finishing up at half past eight. Nine at the latest.

She wandered through the fiction section, but was truly most interested in some of the spell books and potions manuals that had been out of print for decades. She disappeared behind a stack, and found an entire section that was not visible from the chairs in the main room. She gasped at how expansive the library actually was, and now knew for certain that she would need to come back at a later time to fully examine it.

She found an entire shelf of Draco’s old Hogwarts texts, still in pristine condition. She ran her fingers over the book that Remus Lupin had used in third year, smiling at the memory of him. Pulling it from the shelf, she flipped to the center where she knew she would find Grindylows, and her smile vanished when she saw a tight cursive in the margins.

green or beige?

assoc. w merpeople?

Her lips tightened, realizing that similar questions were scratched into her own copies. She turned the page to find moving drawings of Harry being chased by a Dementor, Ron being shot with several arrows, and one possibly of her, but it was hard to tell as a cloud of hair was attacking the subject.

She rolled her eyes and flipped through a few more chapters and found that Chapter 18 had been completely ignored in Draco Malfoy’s studies, and instead he had spent that week drawing pictures of her various deaths. There were decapitations, strangulations, even several eviscerations.

Hermione closed the book and placed it back on the shelf, frowning. She blinked away the shame at remembering that certain chapters of her own text books were also filled with doodlings, although not of his death. She had been so foolish. All thoughts were forgotten though when she spotted a first edition of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

Twenty minutes later had Hermione holding seven books in her arms, most of them heavy tomes. She hadn’t even left the educational section, still looking through textbooks that had been used fifty years ago, or potions manuals that had been forbidden in teaching since the nineteenth century. Her arms were starting to shake, and there was sweat at the back of her neck, causing her hair to begin its humid journey away from her body. Every time she thought of levitating the books, she got distracted by another volume she wanted to browse.

When she added an eighth book to her pile, she decided it was time to consolidate. There was really no way she could take eight books.

A throat cleared behind her, and Hermione spun around to see Draco Malfoy standing ten paces from her. She held her breath, and pulled the books even closer to her chest.

He looked between her face and the stack of books she was clutching. He lifted a brow at her and said nothing, which of course caused Hermione to begin speaking quickly.

"Your – your mother invited me over this evening to browse the library. I'm selecting books which I'd like to borrow." Her heart was racing. She regretted explaining herself, as if she was guilty of breaking into Malfoy Manor to steal books. Where was Narcissa?

"I know," he said, looking her up and down. He stepped closer to her and said, "I told my mother that she was foolish to think that you would be able to carry your selections out with you without the aid of a small sled." She blushed. He continued, "So she sent me to give you this." He held out a wicker basket that she had not realized he was holding.

She took the basket from him and clumsily found a way to dump her books into it. She looked up and he was watching her.

"Thank you," she tried.

"My mother would like you to join us for a late dinner."

Hermione's eyes popped out of her head. "What? It's half past eight!"

He looked as pleased as she did as he said, "Yes, that's why they call it a 'late' dinner, Granger. The table is already set for three. She is waiting on us."

"I—I'm not…" She took a breath. "What I meant to say is that I've already eaten, and I would hate to take up any more of her time this evening –"

"Granger." He rolled his eyes at her. "Do you really think saying 'no' is an option?"

"Just because you are unable to say 'no' to Mummy, doesn't mean no one else can," she hissed. "I will apologize to her directly and decline." She hooked the basket over her elbow and walked around him. He grabbed her other arm as she passed.

"Look, you silly bint. You have chosen to befriend my mother and pester my household –"

"To clarify, she chose me—"

"And for whatever reason, she has invited you to dine with her this evening, going out of her way to eat later in the evening so she could fit into your *busy* schedule—"

"I tried to come over *after* dinner!"

"—So I don't know what your intentions are for being here, haunting my library, and playing house with my mother—"

“I find your mother to be a wonderful conversationalist, a generous host, and all-around lovely person. It’s a shame those genetic traits ended with her,” she said.

She was almost panting, and his hand was still on her arm, squeezing her. She desperately wanted to pull her eyes from him, but she knew it would be admitting defeat. So, she glared up at him, taking the opportunity to truly study his irises, finding the speckles of blue that popped when there was color on his cheekbones.

She blinked, feeling stupid for still finding him attractive after everything, and looked away, pulling her arm from him. She continued around the stacks, heading for the library doors, still feeling her arm burning from where his fingers were. She heard him follow. She turned left outside of the library, passing the Malfoy men.

“Granger.” She looked back to see Draco in the doorway. He cocked his head to the right, and leaned against the door frame.

She glared at him and turned around, having clearly no idea where she was going. He led her further down the corridor than she’d been before, passing beautiful tapestries and a grand window overlooking the grounds. The sky was still pink with the sunset, and she struggled to keep up with him *and* fully examine the Manor.

He stopped outside of a grand entryway, and gestured for her to enter first. She turned the corner to find an extravagant dining room with a long table, and Narcissa Malfoy at the head.

“Hermione, dear. I’m so glad you could sit down with us.”

“Yes, thank you, Narcissa. I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said. Draco entered and snorted so only she could hear. Narcissa gestured for her to sit to her left and she felt Draco lift the basket of books from her arm. She looked up at him and he raised a brow at her as Mippy appeared to take the basket elsewhere.

Hermione turned back to Narcissa and headed for her chair. Draco followed, and pulled her chair for her. She found herself irritated that he behaved like a perfect gentleman in front of Narcissa, albeit a frowning one.

“Did you have luck in the library?” Narcissa asked, as Draco seated himself across from her. Wonderful.

“Amazing luck,” she said, smiling at Narcissa. “I barely left the instructional texts. I do think I’ve taken too many though, so I will try to consolidate before I leave.”

“Oh, absolutely not.” Narcissa waved her hand. “You are welcome to take as many as you’d like, and I expect you to come back and exchange them for more.” Hermione smiled back at her as Draco aggressively shook his napkin onto his lap. “Draco is really the only one who uses the library anymore.”

Hermione watched him pick lint off of the tablecloth, refusing to make eye contact with either of them. Her eyes narrowed at him and she couldn’t resist.

“I almost took the signed copies of the Lance Gainsworth series to read again, but your mother was telling me how much you love them, Draco. I’d hate for you to part with them.”

His hands stilled and his jaw tightened. Hermione’s lips twisted into a smile as he looked up at her.

She continued, “I, myself, have read the series four or five times through as well, so I know how difficult it is not to have them at your fingertips.”

He gave her a patronizing smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “That was very kind of you, Granger.” Narcissa smiled into her water glass. He continued, “And which books *are* you leaving with tonight?”

“Well, I am *borrowing*,” she directed this at Draco, and then changed her focus to Narcissa, who seemed quite interested in her selections, “several texts that I know are now out of print, a few books that were used at Hogwarts before they were updated, and I found a book on dragon capture and control that I had never seen before. So, I am hoping it helps with my research project.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Narcissa said. The bowls in front of them filled with pumpkin soup, and Hermione was reminded that she barely ate dinner earlier. Narcissa continued, “Draco, you’ve heard about Hermione’s Gringotts project, yes?”

Draco paused in plucking a bread roll from the floating basket. “I can’t say that I have.” He looked to her, expectantly, but bored.

“The goblins at Gringotts are hoping to bring in and ‘train’ another dragon to replace the Ukrainian Ironbelly that escaped last year,” she said, straightening the napkin on her lap. “I want to avoid this barbaric treatment as much as possible, and hope to work with the goblins to create alternative means of protection.”

Hermione hoped the conversation would end there, as she had no intention of fully explaining the depths of the project with Draco. And also the pumpkin soup smelled delicious.

She looked to her silverware and found three spoons. How many courses did Narcissa prepare? It seemed like Narcissa had chosen the furthest away from the plate, so Hermione did the same.

“And you think the goblins will be willing to do things a different way?”

She looked at him as he brought his spoon to his lips. She found herself quite jealous of the elegance in that movement.

“I think negotiation is always possible,” she said, dipping her spoon, but a chuckle paused her.

“I’ve worked with them personally several times over the past months.” Draco smirked at her like he had whenever Snape had chosen him for a potions demonstration. “They are not

amenable to wizarding changes."

Hermione's full spoon hovered over her soup dish. "Then we will have to make them see—"

"You can't make a goblin see anything," he said, with a slight shake of his head, as if she was absolutely going to lose. She felt the heat come to her cheeks.

"The Ministry will be able to mandate laws that will force the goblins to comply," she said.

"So you think goblin rights should be subordinate to wizards law?" He lifted a brow at her.

She gaped at him. "I said no such thing-"

"The negotiations will only work if you get what you want, is that right Granger?" He leaned back in his chair.

"Draco," Narcissa cooed, and Hermione remembered that she was there too. Hermione finally placed her uneaten spoonful of soup back in the bowl and sat tall.

"The only thing I *want* is for no further harm to come to magical creatures by Gringotts' hands. There is a better solution out there, and I want wizards and goblins to agree upon it."

He picked up his spoon as if the conversation was not fazing him at all. "Maybe it *is* the best solution, Granger. Maybe you're not the first person to start this fight, only to find that keeping a dragon in the bowels of Gringotts is the best security method there is."

"It must not be the best method if three seventeen-year-olds were able to free it and ride out on its back last spring," she said.

His eyes flashed at her and he took a breath—

"Mippy!" Narcissa called, voice strained. Mippy appeared and Narcissa asked, "Can we please get some wine for the table?"

As Mippy produced a carafe of red wine and disappeared, Hermione regretted ignoring Narcissa thus far. She turned to her host to begin some sort of conversation and picked up her spoon again. It really smelled so good.

Draco had other ideas. "Of course, getting down into the lower vaults required a bit of mischief if I remember correctly," he said, and Hermione turned back to him, lips tight. "The three seventeen-year-olds first used Unforgivables to pass through the first layers of security. So maybe it's not the dragon at all that failed."

She narrowed her eyes at him and he raised a brow at her.

"Hermione, dear," Narcissa said. "A glass of elf-made wine?"

She turned to Narcissa, "No, thank you, Narcissa." She turned back to his smug face. "So, you're saying, keep the maimed and tortured dragon downstairs, and beef up the upstairs security? That will solve the problem with the maim and torture."

“Draco? Wine?”

“No, mother.” Eyes never leaving Hermione. “I’m just saying that the fault you find in the security is based on the ability to get past the dragon, but they would not have been able to get past the dragon without a bit of law-breaking upstairs. You might want to keep these arguments out of your presentation, Granger, else they decide to investigate further.”

“Well, I’m going to have some wine,” she heard Narcissa mutter, as Hermione’s ears burned, watching Draco dip his spoon in that beautiful soup she had yet to taste.

“Oh, thank you, Draco, but the Wizengamot already knows every detail of that situation. See, *I’m* perfectly capable of staying out of Azkaban all by myself, without the aid of a *champion*.”

She watched as his spoon stopped on its way to his lips, and the color on his cheekbones brightened. Any victory she felt was short-lived when she realized that even Narcissa had become very still next to her. She had gone too far.

“I—Narcissa thank you for dinner. You really are too kind to invite me to stay, but I must leave now.” She placed her spoon back on the table and took one last look at the pumpkin soup before standing.

“Oh, Hermione dear, please stay,” Narcissa said. Hermione looked to her and did not see disgust, so it was possible the relationship was salvageable.

“I’m sorry, I can’t.” She placed her napkin on her chair, avoiding Draco’s gaze that she knew was on her.

“Let Draco walk you out,” Narcissa said. “I’d hate for you to lose your way.”

“Absolutely not,” she said, almost laughing. “I’d rather get lost in the Malfoy dungeons than have him anywhere near me. Again, thank you Narcissa. You’ve been nothing but generous.”

She nodded one last time to Narcissa, and walked out of the dining room. She turned right outside of the doors, huffing, and continued down the hall, recognizing several of the tapestries.

It took her a bit longer to find the library than she had remembered, taking several incorrect turns, and even pausing at the window overlooking the grounds to take in the view at night. Once she found the busts of Malfoy men, she knew her own way and was quite proud of herself. She approached the fireplaces and found no Floo powder. Draco had offered her a bag of it two weeks ago, but she didn’t remember him reaching for it. The hall was bare. No end tables or hidden shelves where one could store the powder.

“*Accio Floo powder!*” she whispered, with no luck.

Just as she was about to walk out the front door and try to make her way to an Apparition point, she heard the click of dragon leather. She closed her eyes and prayed to Merlin that it

was Narcissa. She turned and Draco was making his way toward her, hiding a smug smirk. She glared at him and crossed her arms.

When he reached her, she noticed that he was holding her books that she had left without. She blushed but tried to raise a brow at him. They were bound together by a ribbon of Mippy's crafting, and as he extended them to her, one finger hooked in the ribbon, she realized he placed a feather-light charm on them. She took the books without comment, and it seemed the minute she touched them the charm wore off, and she found herself fumbling with eight heavy tomes with no help from him.

Once she righted herself, she glared up at him and his eyes were gleaming with delight, but he hid a smile still. He produced the Floo powder bag with a wave of his hand. Of course. She reached for it and he pulled it away from her.

"Mother's quite upset, you know. After the scene you've made, I hope this is your last visit to Malfoy Manor."

"Oh, fuck off, Draco," she said.

She grabbed the Floo powder, tossed it into the fireplace, and as she entered and turned to call out her destination, she got one last glimpse of him, still holding the Floo powder, staring at the spot next to him that she used to occupy, and the corner of his lips lifting.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait everyone! But I present a very long chapter to apologize.

Dear Narcissa,

I beg your forgiveness for the way I behaved at dinner last night. I can be very passionate about my projects and I know that Draco can be very passionate as well. I very much enjoy your company and I truly appreciate the invitation into your home and to your dinner table.

If there is anything I can do to apologize, please let me know.

Sincerely,
Hermione J. Granger

~*~

Dearest Hermione,

You are so kind to think you need to apologize. The truth is, I quite enjoyed myself last night. I don't get to Muggle London for theatre as often as I used to, so last night was just what I needed.

I am sure to be visiting Cornerstone next weekend, so I shall see you then. Perhaps we can have a quick lunch on your break?

And I have sent with this note a small package, as I believe you did not get to taste it last night.

Yours,
Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione opened the small brown package and found a container of the pumpkin soup. When she brought it to her lips she almost cried.

~*~

Monday morning she was met at her cubicle with a memo from the Auror Office. She winced as she opened it, hoping not to be dealing with Draco this early in the week, but it was from the head of the Auror Office requesting a collaborative meeting between her department and theirs regarding the dragon egg found the week before.

Clunky footsteps, and then Aiden was poking his head over her cubicle wall.

"You get invited to the party, too?" He flashed her a grin and waived a matching memo at her.

Less than an hour later she and Aiden were sharing a lift up to Level 2 with the scent of the orange Aiden was peeling and devouring. She declined when he offered her a wedge, and tried to ignore the smell like she was currently ignoring his yammering about how much nicer the Level 2 desks and cubes were from theirs.

They found their way to the conference room with a minute to spare and the first pair of eyes she met upon entering were Draco's. It was to be expected, as he was the analyst on the dragon egg case, but still surprising first thing in the morning. She quickly looked elsewhere and found Aiden pulling a chair for her next to an older witch who was there to take a transcript.

"Let's get started." Gawain Robards, head of the Auror Department, stood and tapped his wand on the table. A three-dimensional image of a dragon egg appeared in the middle of the table, and Hermione immediately thought of those science fiction holograms. "As you all know, this dragon egg was apprehended in London last week, and with the help of Miss Granger," he nodded at her, "it was identified as a Portuguese Long-Snout egg. Now, smuggling dragon eggs is not uncommon, but it was Mr. Malfoy who pieced together that the Long-Snout egg was found within a three-block radius of where the Hungarian Horntail egg was found a month ago."

Hermione looked at Draco, and found him suppressing the smirk he would wear in Snape's class every time the professor would praise his potion-making. Well, at least he was suppressing it. Draco stood.

"We believe these dragon dealers are selling to the same buyer, although unsuccessfully thus far," Draco said.

He took a stack of papers that were arranged in front of him and began passing them out. When Hermione received hers, she found that it was a full seventeen-page report. Hermione looked up at him, and watched as he summarized the report, pointed to the important charts

and maps, maintained control of the room, and for the first time she wondered what it was he planned to do after his probation completed in December. Because he was quite good at this.

Hermione raised her hand. Draco blinked at her.

“Yes, Miss Granger,” Draco articulated.

“The dragon dealer who was apprehended last week. What does he have to say?”

Robards cleared his throat. “He has been questioned, and found to know nothing about the buyer. He was just the transportation it seems.”

“And what country was the Portuguese Long-Snout egg smuggled in from?” Hermione asked Robards.

“Portugal,” Draco said drily. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

“Are we sure?” she said.

Robards pushed his glasses up and leaned forward. “What is it you’re getting at, Miss Granger?”

“There was a case of a newly laid Portuguese Long-Snout egg being smuggled into Switzerland last year with the intention of hatching it during the coldest point of winter. Long-Snouts are typically hatched only in the Portuguese heat, so the dragon dealers and buyers were clearly experimenting with something.”

Robards nodded at her. “I will look into that for you.”

“Thank you.”

Draco looked back and forth between the two of them, waiting for the go ahead to continue. She raised a brow at him.

“As I was saying, we’re hoping the Bureau can help us determine what the buyer might want with two very different types of dragon eggs –“

She raised her hand again. This time knowing that he hated it.

“Granger.”

“What causes you to believe there might be similarities? Can’t the buyer just be wanting to farm himself a whole variety of dragons?”

Draco took a cleansing breath. “That is a possibility, but we would like to rule out others.”

“Why would he want a Long-Snout though?” Aiden asked, twirling his quill in a distracted way. “That’s like, the least impressive dragon. There’s no uses for any of its skin in fashion, and the horns have no magical properties. I mean, if I were to start a dragon collection, I’d go for the best.”

Hermione gasped, thoughts buzzing in her brain. The room looked at her.

“The only interesting quality about the Portuguese Long-Snout is that it is easiest to cross-breed with a Common Welsh Green,” she said. She looked to Aiden for confirmation. “The Long-Snout and—“

“The Hungarian Horntail,” Aiden finished for her, smiling.

Hermione turned back to Draco, as he was still standing at the front of the room.

“And a Common Welsh Green egg went ‘missing’ from the Wales reserve two months ago, appearing in Knockturn Alley shortly after,” she said. “It was sighted, but not recovered.”

“So, Miss Granger,” Robards nodded to the transcribing witch, “your analysis would be that whoever was trying to procure the Horntail and Long-Snout already has the Common Welsh egg, and is hoping to cross-breed?”

“Yes, sir.”

Draco’s lips quirked and he swallowed. “Ten points to Gryffindor.”

Aiden chuckled in a dim sort of way, and Hermione sent Draco a glare.

“Well, that’s that!” Robards stood from the table. “We’ll be in touch on this, exchanging memos and the like, but I’d say that’s the fastest mystery ever solved here. I’ll get the team researching the Welsh Green disappearance and get it tracked. Miss Granger please send me all your notes on the Welsh Green.” She nodded. Robards gestured back and forth between Hermione and Draco. “You two should work together more often. You’d save the rest of us a world of trouble.”

Hermione released a shaky laugh and Draco frowned at Robards. She looked down at the desk as she stood and gathered her paperwork, intending to read through Draco’s work later. Robards strolled out with a thank you to all, and Aiden began chatting with Draco, much to Hermione’s delight. She snuck out before she could have more of an interaction with either of them.

~*~

That following Saturday was a slow day at Cornerstone, and Hermione found herself daydreaming more often than usual. She had fifteen minutes until Morty came downstairs to take over the desk for her lunch break, and she found the need to step out for some cool air.

There was a book in the reserved requests under Black, and Hermione remembered Narcissa’s note from last weekend, mentioning that she may stop by and possibly invite her to lunch. As it was now lunch time, and she had not yet seen Narcissa, she supposed she should get used to the idea of the crackers she brought as a back-up plan.

She had spent the morning pretending not to read the day's *Prophet*, which featured a picture of Draco and the blonde girl he'd been out with before. They had gone out again last night apparently. She kept arranging books on top of the article so customers wouldn't catch her re-reading it, but she always kept a gap over the image of Draco's profile, smiling at the girl over drinks in Hogsmeade. The ledger rested permanently over the girl's face though.

As a large woman wearing far too much purple bid her a good day, she went back to her doodlings, wondering what she would do to entertain herself this evening. Ginny was out of town with her team but would be home very late in the night. Halloween was in two weeks, and she knew it would be tremendously busy, so this weekend she planned to enjoy the quiet. Perhaps she would clean?

Hermione frowned at her quill, hovering over the picture of Draco, and resolved to acquire a more active social life just as the front door opened. Perhaps Ron was right. She didn't need to work on the weekends if it was keeping her from leading a normal life, going out of town and the like.

She lifted her eyes from *Prophet*-Draco smiling at his date, chirping a "Good afternoon," to see the real Draco at her counter, not smiling. She blinked.

"What." She stood up straight.

"'What?'" he repeated. "Is that how you greet customers here?" He lifted a brow at her, and her hands tried to move the books around on the desk to cover the article without drawing attention.

She took a deep breath and tried a bit nicer. "Are you here for the reserved book?"

She watched as he opened his mouth, as if to speak, and then simply nodded once. Her brows knitted together, but she did not comment. Hermione grabbed up the bag labeled "Black," and began entering a line in the ledger, which she left right where it was on top of the blonde dolt's face.

The book, Hermione realized, was considered to be quite "girly" – a fiction by a female writer with a female lead character. She looked up, about to tease him, and found him watching her.

"Have your tastes changed, Draco?" The corner of her mouth pulled up into a smirk. He blinked at her. She shook the book at him.

"Oh, it's... not for me."

"Oh, alright." She felt like she should tease him about his "gift," but he was standing so stiffly and there was something off about him. She plucked a bag from the shelf, placed the book inside and held it out to him. He stared at it.

"Does Cornerstone do gift wrapping?"

“Do we… uh, yes, we do.” She took the bag back and began to clear the counter as he watched her. Her face began to warm and she didn’t know why.

She cleared a space on the counter, pushing a few books aside, and turned to grab the wrapping paper. When she turned back she realized that the *Daily Prophet* was spread out on the desk, visible now that she had removed the books. She held her breath. She didn’t dare look up at him, but just closed the paper, and tucked it away. It was completely natural to read the paper during the day, and perhaps that was the article she landed on when the last customer came in. Perfectly explainable. She laid the wrapping paper out and placed the book on top, only now realizing that this could indeed be a gift – for the blonde.

"My mother and I are stopping for a quick lunch at Fortescue's."

"Oh. Tell her I say hello?" Her hands straightened the paper beneath the book and grabbed up the scissors from the cup next to the register. So Narcissa had chosen lunch with her son over lunch with her? Fine. Of course, Hermione realized that this was not the most rational of grumbling –

"Does Mr. Hindes come downstairs to cover your lunch?"

She looked to the clock as she folded the wrapping paper around the book. "Yes, usually around one." Her fingers struggled with the tape and she glanced up to find him watching her hands work. She looked down quickly and finished taping one side then folding the other.

"Would you like to join us for lunch?"

Her hands slipped on the paper, losing the fold, and her eyes snapped to his. He was wearing his neutral expression again, but as she searched his face for the joke, he swallowed.

"Your mother wants a repeat performance of last Saturday? In public?" She smiled and refolded the side, taping it with trembling fingers and turned to grab the ribbon.

"If there's pumpkin soup, I promise to let you eat it."

She grinned at the ribbon and began twisting it around the package. "Tell your mother that I appreciate the invitation, but I'm too busy here today. It was nice of her to offer."

"I'm the one offering, Granger."

She looked up at him and his eyes narrowed at her.

"We both know who sent you, Malfoy." She tugged the ribbon closed, placed the wrapped gift into the small bag, and held the bag out to him. He took it from her and opened his mouth to speak. Just then, the door hiding the staircase to Morty's upstairs flat opened. Morty exited, adjusting his glasses.

"Miss Granger," he said. "Good business today?"

"Yes, absolutely --"

"Mr. Malfoy," Morty smiled. "Such a pleasure to see you here." Morty's eyes brightened and Hermione frowned.

"Mr. Hindes, how are you?" Draco grinned and shook Morty's hand.

"Look how tall you've gotten! My! Was he always this tall, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked between the two of them. "Uh, no. He was shorter... before..." She picked up the quill and began copying notes into the ledger.

"Did you get everything you need today, Draco?" Morty said.

"Yes, thank you. I was just here to see if Miss Granger would accompany me for lunch today. My mother is just down the street."

Her ink blotted and she ground her teeth together.

"Oh, lovely! Yes, please do. I've got the shop." Morty started pushing her out from behind the counter.

"Well, I -- I have so much to do here, I don't think--"

"Nonsense. Take all the time you need."

Hermione found her bag shoved into her chest, her quill ripped from her hand, and her body forced away from the counter as Morty asked Draco to say hello to Narcissa for him and to take care of himself. Hermione got her bearings and pulled her bag strap up to her shoulder. Draco bid Morty a good day and Hermione stalked behind him as he exited the shop, holding the door for her.

She walked through and suddenly the chatter and noise disappeared and she was on a quiet street corner with Draco Malfoy with nothing to talk about. He let the door shut behind him and turned to her, lifting a brow.

"Well, congratulations, Malfoy," she said, shifting her bag on her shoulder. "You have a lunch companion."

"Oh, I'm just so glad Morty could cover your lunch," he said, turning down the street toward Fortescue's. He turned over his shoulder. "You looked swamped in there."

She glared at him and followed. The Cornerstone Books bag swung from his fingers in a jaunty way and Hermione skipped to catch up with him. They paused as a group of shoppers crossed them at the next corner, and when it was clear to go, she felt his hand come up to her back, guiding her softly. Her body must have twitched because he looked down at her and she watched her feet as they carried her across the cobblestones.

They arrived at the corner across from Florean Fortescue's moments later, and Hermione looked up to see Narcissa Malfoy sitting on the patio, dressed in decadent blue robes with a matching oversized blue hat that reminded Hermione very much of the grand Muggle movie

stars. Hermione felt severely under-dressed. Draco sighed next to her. She looked up at him, and she could tell he was biting back a comment.

“Your mother certainly knows how to make a statement,” she said as they approached the gate to the patio.

He held it open for her, and as she passed him he muttered, “You have no idea.” His voice brushed across her ear and she smiled and shivered.

Narcissa stood from the table. “Hermione! Oh, I’m so glad you were able to join us.” She couldn’t help but notice that the table was already set for three.

“Yes, thank you,” Hermione said, as Narcissa clasped her hand and pulled her in for a light embrace. “Your son can be very persuasive.”

Narcissa smiled at Draco, and gestured for Hermione to take the seat across from her. Draco pulled her chair for her, which was starting to become a habit, and then nodded at his mother and headed inside to order.

It was a beautiful fall afternoon, and Narcissa looked stunning in the sunlight peeking through the patio roof. They made small talk for a minute or so before Draco returned with three cups and saucers.

“Oh, thank you, Draco,” Narcissa said. “I do hope you brought over enough honey for the two of you.”

Hermione’s pulse spiked. Narcissa was just about to tell Draco about the “coincidence” that they took their tea the same way, and Draco was going to see right through it. Hermione held her breath as Narcissa’s lips split into a grin.

“Do you happen to know how Hermione takes her tea?”

“Granger drinks coffee.”

Hermione’s eyes snapped to his as he set down a cup of coffee in front of her. She stared at it.

“So unless she puts honey in her coffee…”

“Oh,” Narcissa said, turning her eyes on her. “I didn’t know you preferred coffee to tea.”

“I – yes, I do drink coffee more often.” She turned to Draco. “Thank you.”

“The next time you’re at the Manor I will have some brewed for you,” Narcissa said.

“That’s very kind of you.” Hermione poured the milk into her cup.

Narcissa carried on a conversation with her for the next twenty minutes or so, discussing everything from the new ownership of Fortescue’s to the McHandry fiction she’d finished. Draco sat silently with them, fixing his tea with three spoons of honey and milk, and picking at the scones that the waiter delivered. Hermione could feel him at her right side where he sat

between the two women, but kept from looking at him unless Narcissa dragged him into the conversation. She could feel him watching her.

“Hermione, dear, I’d love to meet your parents the next time they are in England,” Narcissa said, and Hermione almost choked on her scone. She quickly sipped her coffee before she coughed. She glanced up to see if either of them noticed, and saw that Draco was frowning at his mother. Narcissa continued, “Will they be coming here for the holidays or will you be heading to Australia to visit them?”

Narcissa was spreading jam onto her scone, smiling at her. Hermione looked at the table.

“Neither, unfortunately. The holiday season is a very busy time… for dentists. Umm…” She trailed off, and could feel two pairs of pale eyes on her.

“Oh, that’s very interesting,” Narcissa jumped in. “What a shame though. And when do they plan to visit you next?”

“I… Well, they…”

Hermione felt like she should lie and say “springtime.” The odds of Narcissa Malfoy actually wanting to visit with them, or following up in the spring, or asking to write them letters… or continue speaking of this at all…were extremely high, she realized. She put down her butter knife that she had begun playing with. She looked up and Draco was watching her very carefully. She turned to Narcissa and found her searching her face, and knew then that she had hesitated too long. She took a breath and looked at her coffee cup.

“Actually, never.” She smiled sadly and trained her eyes on Narcissa. “We had to erase their memories two years ago, before… everything began.” Narcissa pursed her lips. “They live in Australia together, with no memory of me.” She swallowed and looked down at her hands. “I’ve created a ‘pen-pal’ relationship with my mother though, so I get to hear about what they’re doing and how they’re getting on,” she rambled. Hermione painted on a fake smile and looked up to find Draco clenching his jaw, frowning at her.

She pulled her eyes away from him when Narcissa’s hand grasped hers.

“I’m so sorry, Hermione.” Narcissa’s blue eyes were swimming as they looked into Hermione’s, and she had never felt such honest compassion coming from her. She was apologizing for so much. “You’re very strong. And I admire that so.”

Hermione nodded so her voice wouldn’t break. She took a breath. “Well, I would love to talk about something else.” She gave a shaky laugh. “I didn’t mean for the mood to change so dramatically.”

She chanced a glance at Draco, and found him glaring at the table, jaw tight.

"It was very insightful of the Order," he looked up at her, "to take that precaution." The way his voice rolled over "the Order," she knew that he understood exactly what happened.

"Yes,” she said, staring directly into his clever eyes. “I can't thank them enough."

Narcissa fiddled with her teacup and milk, watching them.

Twenty minutes of light conversation later and it was time for Hermione to return to Cornerstone. Narcissa suggested Draco walk her back, of course, and she found herself retracing their path back to the bookshop.

"Do you think you'll stay on with the Auror Office?" she asked. "Your term is up in six weeks or so, yes?" A chill wind brushed across the alley, and she had to push her hair away from her face as it whipped around her head.

"Yes, December 10th." He tucked his hands into his coat pockets. "I'll be starting something new, actually. Take a few weeks for the holidays, then jump into the new year. New millennium."

"Right," she said, and couldn't decide if she was glad or disappointed that she wouldn't be seeing him around the Ministry past December 10th. "What is it you plan do?"

They paused at a corner and he took a breath. "I'm opening my own company." He cleared his throat and she looked up at him. "A kind of consulting group. I'm announcing on November 1st."

His sentences were clipped and his eyes darted around the street looking at anything but her, but Hermione had her interest piqued.

“A consulting group? And what will you specialize in?”

He paused before answering, then took a breath. “Litigation and contracts, finances, management and operations, and I’m hoping to have a few other minor branches with select specialists.”

Hermione stared up at him. She hardly knew what half of that meant. She laughed.

“What?” he said, looking down at her with untrusting eyes.

“You're just... opening a company,” she said. A laughed bubbled up. “At nineteen.” She smiled at him shaking her head.

“You and your friends defeated a dark wizard at eighteen.” He lifted a brow at her, challenging.

“Actually, Harry was seventeen.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

She smiled at the ground, watching her feet as they walked. “So, if I’m understanding this correctly, you’ll be providing legal counsel for Wizengamot hearings, advising businesses on their budgets and operations, things like that?”

“Essentially.” Very non-committal.

“And you think individuals and businesses will hire you based on your nineteen years of experience in those fields?” She knew teasing him lightly like this would probably provoke him, but while he was being so cagey…

“No.” He shook his head. “They will hire my *firm* based on the personnel I will surround myself with. Specialists and the like. I’m in talks with Cuthbert Mockridge to bring him out of retirement to take over the finances department—”

Hermione looked up at him. Cuthbert Mockridge had been the head of the Goblin Liaison Office before retiring. His brow was drawn together as he continued.

“—And I’ve begun a relationship with Tiberius Ogden, and plan to ask him to specialize in Wizengamot services—“

Hermione remembered the name from the papers. He had been an elder in the Wizengamot, resigning when Umbridge arrived. He and his son were also heir to the Ogden’s Old Firewhisky fortune. She watched him as he listed off several others and explained their capabilities. His cheekbones were pink and he kept his gaze on the ground, on the shops, on the sky, anywhere but her, but he was speaking fast, ready for a fight. He took a breath to explain another personnel decision he’d made and she stopped him.

“That’s very exciting, Draco,” she said. He looked down at her. “You don’t need to defend your company to me. I think it will be a great success. You were excellent at leading the meeting on the dragon egg this week – prepared, succinct, authoritative. It’s like you were born for it.”

She smiled warmly. His jaw tightened and the wind blew a lock of hair across his forehead. She looked away to keep from pushing it back into place and saw that they had arrived back at Cornerstone. She had a thought.

“You’ve been planning this for a while, it seems,” she said, noting his silence. “Are you investing your inheritance into this new business?”

He paused. “That’s the plan.”

“Investment and passion are two key ingredients for success.” He looked down at her again and the wind blew her hair across her face this time. She pushed it back. “And your father must be in support if he released your inheritance to you?”

His eye twitched as he looked away from her, something she’d never seen. He didn’t like her bringing up Lucius.

“Yes, a small amount at first. Then the rest on January 1st. Contingent on a few things.” He scratched at his jaw and shifted his weight. She’d never seen him so uncomfortable. She tried to lighten the moment.

“Well,” she said, turning to step up to the door, “what a pity for all those half-blood and Muggle-born girls that thought you would invest all that money in their happy future with

you.” She turned and found him studying her. “How disappointing for them.” She gave him a sarcastic smile.

“I thought you of all people knew not to believe a word of what Skeeter prints.” He smirked at her. She stood on the doorstep of Cornerstone and was struck by the image of a boy walking a girl to her door at the end of a date, waiting for a kiss. Her heart ached. She shook herself.

“I think we did a fine job today, Malfoy.” She hugged herself against the wind. “A full hour lunch date with your mother and no casualties. I’d say that’s progress.” She grinned and watched his eyes flash at her. She nodded at him in goodbye.

“Granger.” She turned with her hand on the doorknob. “About your parents…”

Her throat clicked as she took a breath. “Yes?”

“You did the right thing.” His eyes were pale and they bored into her. She was breathless.

“Thank you.”

“Have you… been by your home since the war ended?”

“No, not since I left.”

He nodded at her.

“Don’t.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> So appreciative of all the comments and reviews. Thanks you guys.

"*Hermione Jean Granger, WAKE UP!*"

Hermione snapped her eyes open and sprang up in bed, reaching for her wand, to find Ginny Weasley standing on her bed.

"What? What's happened?" Her heart was racing and she felt like ice had been thrown on her.

"What the *bloody hell* is this??" Ginny stood above her, one foot on either side of her legs and held up a newspaper. Her eyes were wide and bright, surprisingly awake.

"What… I mean, well, what is it?" Hermione's eyes were adjusting. She waved her wand and lit all the bulbs in the room.

Ginny knelt over her and thrust the paper into her face, reading the headline out loud as Hermione's brain registered it on the page.

"The Star-Crossed Romance of Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy."

Hermione gasped and grabbed the pages from the feral-looking ginger. She unfolded the top pages to find a picture of two young people outside of Cornerstone. Her eyes squinted, and she realized the young people were her and Draco. She could barely recognize them. Did Skeeter doctor the photo?

"When did *this* happen?" Ginny screeched and Hermione winced as her eyes ran over the article, catching the phrases "visited her at work," "lust-filled eyes," "lunch with his mother."

“I—I – Yesterday!” Hermione’s pitch was slowly matching Ginny’s without her permission. “We had lunch with Narcissa yesterday and –“

“Oh, I know!” Ginny bounced. “It continues on page seven!”

“*What?!*” Hermione ripped through the pages to find page seven featuring several more highlights of the afternoon, including a picture of the three of them at Fortescue’s and a picture of the two of them crossing the street, his hand coming up to guide her.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this!”

“It wasn’t planned! He asked me to join them for lunch –“

“*He* asked you?” Ginny grabbed her shoulders.

“I – yes, but it was clear that Narcissa had sent him. And then we walked to Fortescue’s—“ Hermione pointed to the picture of them walking, Draco swinging his Cornerstone bag from his fingertips of one hand, and using the other to touch her back. “—And then we had lunch with Narcissa—“ She pointed to the picture of the three of them sitting on the patio, Narcissa looking positively regal in her robes and hat. “—And then I went back to work! That’s all!”

“That doesn’t explain *this*!”

Ginny crumpled the pages around until the photo on the front page showed again.

“She must have altered it. She –“

Hermione stopped and looked. There was Draco’s smirk, and the way his eyes flash at her. She turned from him, stepping up to the door of Cornerstone, and turned back grinning. It was *just* like a boy walking a girl home from a date, just as she remembered.

She had given her condolences to all the half-bloods and Muggle-borns who would not be marrying him, and he had smirked back at her, telling her not to trust the papers.

“Oh, Merlin, this is terrible.” Hermione covered her face with her hands.

“Terrible? This is the most brilliant thing to happen in months!” Ginny squealed.

“How can you say that?” Hermione grabbed her arm. “Look how desperate I look. Look how easy it is to believe everything Skeeter is saying!”

“Hermione,” Ginny giggled and grabbed her face. “It’s easy to believe because it’s so *mutual*.” She jabbed her finger at Draco’s face. Hermione felt her face flush, watching him smirk at her in the photo. “If you’re desperate,” Ginny said, turning the pages over to the picture of the three of them on the patio, “then he’s *starving*.”

Hermione looked down to see Narcissa chatting animatedly with her, Hermione picking at the scone in front of her, and Draco watching her. She watched as Draco would take a sip of his tea, his eyes moving between her and his mother, landing back on her as he licked the liquid off his lips.

“That’s… That’s not… I mean, Ginny. That’s not what it’s like in person. It’s not accurate!”

“How would you know! You’re not even looking at him in the photo!”

“Oh, my god.” Hermione closed her eyes. “Oh, my *god*. This is the Sunday paper! Everyone I know will see this!

“More than that! This is delivered all over the world!” Ginny laughed, and then she and Hermione thought it at the same time. “Ron will see this.” Ginny raised her brows at her.

Hermione shook her head and held up her hand. “I honestly cannot deal with that right now. My god, was there really nothing that happened in the Wizarding world this weekend that warranted the front page of Sunday’s *Daily Prophet*?” Hermione shook the paper and crumpled the edges.

“Well, the introduction of the ‘new wizarding power couple’ is pretty important, I’d say.” Ginny bit back a grin.

“She does *not* say that!” Hermione gaped at her and Ginny pointed to the words on the page.

~*~

Ms. Skeeter,

I am honored that you find my personal life so interesting, but I would appreciate a re-print to reflect the following changes, to maintain your accuracy:

Draco Malfoy has indeed been visiting Cornerstone Bookshop since his release in August, but he has not been seen “courting” Miss Granger. He has been patronizing a favorite bookshop.

Draco Malfoy has not been visiting Miss Granger every Saturday and Sunday since his release date. If the Daily Prophet *cares to check, the dates he has patronized the bookshop are as follows: Saturday September 4, Saturday September 11, and Saturday October 16. You may pull the ledger notes from Cornerstone Bookshop if you would like.*

Miss Granger and Draco Malfoy have not been found “canoodling” in the stacks of Cornerstone Bookshop, and I would ask your “eye-witnesses” to reexamine their statement, as a false report such as this could cost an employee her job. Said employee would be sure to sue the Daily Prophet, *the author, and the witnesses should this happen.*

If the mints left on the counter for customers are indeed Draco Malfoy’s “favorite mints” then it was unbeknownst to Hermione Granger. She has not put them out for him every time he visits.

Miss Granger is not “leading around” Ronald Weasley **or** *Draco Malfoy. She is not dating either wizard, and has no intention of “drawing this out until the wedding date.”*

And lastly, Miss Granger **was** *available for comment, she simply was not asked for one. If she had been asked for a comment, she would have requested the author pull the story.*

Sincerely,
Hermione J. Granger

~*~

That day at Cornerstone was pure hell. Rita's article had put Cornerstone on the map for a lot of witches and wizards, which Hermione couldn't have been happier about, but unfortunately the influx of new customers all smiled at Hermione with wide, greedy eyes. By noon, when she realized that there were more than twenty people browsing the stacks, and not a one of them had bought anything, she concluded that they were all waiting for Draco to show up.

She started approaching them, asking if they needed recommendations, conjuring comfy chairs to sit and read, and ending with "When you're ready to check out, I'll be at the counter."

That got several of them to leave, including one witch that only bought one book, but stood at the counter for twenty minutes, crying, telling her how wonderful it was to see such a union after all these years.

Morty came downstairs some time after that, took a look around the full shop, and said, "Listen up, you lot. Miss Granger will not be giving private interviews today, as she is at *work*. Mr. Malfoy has no books on reserve, so he will not be visiting her. Please kindly either place your book back where you found it, or bring it up to the register, where *I* will ring you up, as Miss Granger is going on lunch."

Hermione's ears turned red as she smiled down at the ledger. Morty placed a hand on her shoulder.

"If I were you, Miss Granger," he whispered, "I would take my lunch somewhere less public than Fortescue's today."

When she returned from lunch there was a significant drop in the number of people browsing the shop. Morty handed the ledger over to her, and said, "Alright. My turn."

She looked up at him.

"Have you been placing the mints out for him?"

Hermione laughed, knowing full well that Morty chose the mints long ago.

"I hope you don't think that any of that is true. I would never use work hours to… *canoodle*." The word was vile coming from her lips.

"Yes, yes, I know, Miss Granger." Morty took his glasses off to clean them. "But do be careful." She looked up at him, and he pointed to the newspaper that a customer had left on the counter. His finger rested on the picture of Draco and her walking, his hand coming up to her back, and her slight flinch as she looked at the ground. "A boy can only pursue 'hard-to-get' for so long."

She gaped at him. He lifted his brows at her and walked upstairs.

~*~

Hard-to-get. Hard-to-get!

It bothered her the rest of the day and into the next morning.

If there was *anyone* playing hard-to-get, it was –

Hermione stopped that thought. *No one* was playing hard-to-get. They were not courting.

The next day Hermione took the Floo into work, and ignored any staring or whispering as she walked to the lifts. She shared a lift with a young woman she recognized as being a few years above her in Slytherin. She glared and rolled her eyes at her. Hermione didn't know why she felt so shocked. There was sure to be reactions from all different sides of the spectrum.

She got off at her floor and as she walked to her desk, she heard Aiden call out to her.

"Granger!"

Hermione took a calming breath and turned to him. "Good morning, Aiden." She really didn't want any teasing from him today.

He jogged to catch up with her, leaning in conspiratorially. "Did you hear the news?"

"News?"

"Rosenberg's retiring."

Hermione blinked. "Rochelle Rosenberg? From --?"

"House-Elf Relocation." Aiden grinned at her. Hermione's brain was spinning. "Of course, I'm only telling you this out of professional courtesy," he said grandly. "I mean to apply for the position myself, and you *obviously* would not get the job over me." He rolled his eyes dramatically, reminding her of George. "I have seniority over you, so…"

She shifted her bag on her shoulder and shook her head, smiling. "Yes, beginning one day before me *does* give you seniority." She knew he would not be applying for the position.

"Well, something to think about," he said walking back to his desk. "Oh, and you have a visitor." He nodded at her cubicle.

Hermione's brows came together, trying to remember if she had a meeting. Hopefully Mathilda wasn't being kept waiting?

She turned the corner to her cube and found Draco Malfoy, sitting in her chair, legs up on the desk, flipping through one of her files. He looked up at her and grinned.

"Hello, lover."

Her cheeks burned and she lost her breath in a puff that she turned into a laugh.

“Good morning, Malfoy.” She took a moment to place her coat on the hook and put her bag into the drawer. “What brings you here?”

“Robards.”

“Oh?” She was disappointed and relieved at the same time. She turned back to him and found he had not moved out of her chair. “More on the dragon eggs?” She placed her hands on her hips, as she had no idea what to do with them.

“Oh, no.” He waved his hand. “That all got settled on Friday. Buyer caught and under questioning.” He looked up at her. “I would have thought it would make the papers, but apparently there were more important things to report this weekend.”

“Right,” she tried to grin back at him. “Apparently.” She turned to a cabinet and tried to look busy, as he would still not stand from her desk. “I’ve written to Skeeter to ask her to correct some of her glaring inaccuracies. I would have thought the corrections would have made today’s *Prophet*, but hopefully this week.” She pulled out several files that she would work on today and a fresh pot of ink, even though she was positive that the one next to Draco’s foot was full.

“Inaccuracies?” Draco pouted in a mocking way, and Hermione wished he would put his lips away. “You mean those mints weren’t for me?”

She bit back a smile and tapped his feet with a file, having nothing else to do but sit at *her* desk. He kicked his feet off and stood, buttoning his robes. She pushed past him, ignoring the way their bodies brushed each other’s.

“You mentioned Robards?” She spread out her files and replaced the full pot of ink with another full pot of ink.

He handed her a memo. She looked at him quickly, then sat and opened it. It was a copy.

Mathilda,

I was hoping to borrow Granger to work with Malfoy on a case. I believe the two of them could have this figured out by the end of the week!

Hoping you can spare her.

Gawain

A week? Working with Malfoy?

“I’ve reserved the conference room upstairs for this afternoon, seeing as Level 4 has appallingly small rooms and cubicles. I think my cube might be twice the size of yours, Granger.” He looked around, brow raised. “And I’m temporary.” She glared at him. He turned to exit and tossed over his shoulder, “See you at one, Granger.”

She was in so much trouble.

~*~

They solved the case by Wednesday afternoon. Half due to their combined brilliance, and half due to Hermione working hard as Horcruxes to get out of that conference room. It was an ancient rune solving case, which meant utmost concentration was necessary. Quite impossible when Draco looked and smelled like… Draco.

On Tuesday, Hermione had come into the conference room thirty minutes early, just for some peace before Draco joined. It didn't work. He was twenty-eight minutes early, and carrying a coffee cup for her and a tea for him. He placed the cup down in front of her and started talking about the runes, not even allowing her a "thank you." After twenty minutes or so, once he'd settled in and gotten invested in his reading, she took a sip of her coffee and found it prepared exactly how she liked it.

"How had you known that I drink coffee instead of tea?"

He flipped a page.

"Everyone knows you prefer coffee, Granger." She blinked at him. He continued to read. "You've been spilling it all over the Hogwarts library books for years."

She gasped. "I would *never* –"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "I've checked books out after you and found the pages just soiled with spilt coffee. Practically dipped in it."

She knew he was teasing her. She glared at him as he turned another page, holding back a smirk, and tried to remember the last time Harry or Ginny offered her coffee instead of tea.

On Wednesday morning, she flew into the conference room, livid.

"That bitch!" She shook the morning's paper at him, and looked up in time to see Draco snort the tea he was in the middle of sipping. "Sorry," she waved at him, "But she's wicked."

Draco patted his mouth with a napkin and said, "Skeeter, I presume?"

"Yes." She tossed the paper at him and noticed that he was wearing the blue robes that made his eyes stand out. Damn him. "I wrote a follow-up letter last night asking about the status of my corrections, and threatening to write my next letter to her editor. And then this morning she prints this!"

She watched as his eyes scanned the page, searching until he spotted the one-inch box in the bottom right corner of the page, then squinting at the font.

"A correction to 'The Star-Crossed Romance of Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy.' Granger and Malfoy have not been found canoodling at Cornerstone Books."

He looked up at her over the paper, and she threw her arms out in exasperation.

“Did you expect more, Granger?”

“I demanded more! I demanded a re-print!”

He closed the paper and tossed it back to her. He smirked. “And which portions of Sunday’s article so offended you, Granger?”

She blinked at him, hands on her hips. She could feel the heat creeping up her neck.

“The inaccuracies.”

Draco watched his fingers play with the chipped woodgrain on the table. “I believe Skeeter reported that I visited you at work, invited you to lunch with my mother, and then walked you back.” He looked up at her from beneath his lashes. “Was that not what happened?”

Her brows came together. This was a trap. Wasn’t it?

“Fine, then.” She crossed her arms. “It was her artistic interpretation of things. ‘Lust-filled eyes’ and exaggerations –“

“Ah, but I believe the ‘lust-filled eyes’ were mine.” He raised a brow at her. “Are you worried about the stretch of the *Prophet*? If it’s made its way to… say, Ireland?”

The blush had started up her jaw. He was staring at her so casually.

“No, not really.” She shrugged. “I was honestly more concerned with your reputation than mine.” The smirk dropped off his lips. “But if you don’t care, I’ll leave it alone.”

She took her seat at the table. Casually.

“My reputation?”

“Yes.” She opened her notebook. “If I had a girlfriend for every day of the week, I’d be in a hurry to mend things after that article.”

Dangerous, Hermione. Retreat… retreat.

He chuckled. The sound crackled through her. She kept her eyes on her notes.

“How kind of you to worry about my social life, Granger. But I believe my stock might have gone up,” he drawled. “Nothing boosts a reputation more than having the Golden Girl on your arm.”

She glared at him. He raised his brows, and pushed the coffee cup she had not noticed towards her.

~*~

Thursday and Friday were relatively uneventful after she and Draco solved the ancient runes case. She received a personal thank you from Robards for donating her time to the Auror

Office, and his sincerest hopes to work with her again.

Saturday morning she'd woken up late, thrown her clothes on, and headed to the local apparition point without much time to spare. She popped through next to Florean Fortescue's and the bulb flashed to her right.

"Miss Granger!" the reporter yelled. "How did Draco Malfoy break things off with you? Was it a shock? Or did he let you down easy?"

She stumbled. She looked at the reporter, camera-in-hand, and a greedy smile on his face.

"*Excuse* me?" She pinned him with her eyes. "Even *if* I had been dating Draco Malfoy and *if* he had broken things off with me, how *dare* you ask someone that type of question."

He shrugged. "Fine, then. Have you met Katya Viktor? And what do you think of her for your *friend* Draco Malfoy." He smirked at her.

"I have not met her. So, I have no comment. Have a nice day."

Hermione turned and continued down the street to Cornerstone, head spinning.

Who the fuck was Katya Viktor?

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Katya Viktor, it turned out, was the name of the Bulgarian girl Draco had gone out with after his release from Azkaban, star of the “DRACO MALFOY FINDS LOVE” article.

Katya Viktor was also the girl that Draco had been out with the night before. The *Prophet* had printed a photo of him kissing her, accompanied by a Skeeter piece lamenting the loss of the new wizarding power couple.

Hermione had stopped at the *Daily Prophet* main office before rushing to Cornerstone, grabbing up a paper and tucking it into her bag. Once she’d gotten the store open and ready – with only two minutes to spare – she pulled out the paper.

Nothing on the front page, but she flipped to the society and gossip section that Skeeter penned, and there was Draco, pushing the hair out of the Bulgarian’s face, and leaning in to kiss her. The girl smiled against his lips.

Hermione frowned as the picture repeated itself. She’d caught Draco and Pansy Parkinson snogging in the hallways loads of times in 5th year, a few times in 6th. Sometimes she’d be too nervous to interrupt them, knowing that it would be two Slytherins against one Gryffindor. Sometimes she’d be just jealous enough to clear her throat. Pansy would glare at her and call her names, but Draco would turn from where he’d have Pansy pressed against a wall and catch his breath as he looked at her with icy eyes.

This picture didn’t look like that. Draco pushed Katya’s hair away from her eyes and leaned in slowly. It was less… hurried.

Did that mean that Draco wanted her less? Or that he liked her more?

Hermione glanced through the rest of the article, grimacing at her own name splashed throughout. Katya was a model in Bulgaria and her father was a professor at Durmstrang. She was half-blood, surprisingly. The last line:

And poor Hermione Granger. How is she taking the news?

“Not great.” Hermione chuckled to herself as the first customers entered. She threw the paper in the rubbish bin.

~*~

After a very long day of pitying looks and a series of “Such a shame,” it was finally quarter ‘til six. Hermione leaned against the counter as the last customers bid her a good night, and enjoyed the peace for ten seconds until the door opened again.

Draco walked in. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“What do *you* want?”

He lifted a brow at her as he hopped up the stairs. “A book? Do you sell those here?”

She checked her timepiece. “We close in fourteen minutes. You had to come at the very end of the day?”

“Well, I didn’t want any onlookers for our torrid love affair, Granger.” He leaned against the counter and she turned to a stack of books so he wouldn’t see her blush.

“Be quick. I still need to file all of these.”

“It’s on reserve.”

She stopped and looked to the reserve shelf, just now noticing a bag there. She pulled it and saw another girly-fiction title. She raised her brow at him and he raised his in return. She started entering it on the ledger as he watched her.

“A reporter asked me today if you let me down easy,” she said. She glanced at him. “I assume you were seen with one of your girls last night?”

“Yes, Katya. I have six more to go.”

She looked up at him.

“One for every day of the week, right?” he said. She scowled at him for throwing her words back at her. “Which reminds me,” he drawled, “do you have five more copies of this?” He tapped the girly book she was writing the title of.

She scoffed at him while she finished the entry. “You know Draco, just because you *give* them books doesn’t mean they’ll learn to read.”

She looked up at him when he didn’t respond, and found him watching her. His eyes flashed at her.

“Granger,” he said. “If you miss being pictured in the papers with me, I think my Wednesday girl might be a bit of a dud. The day’s all yours.”

His grey eyes were searching her, and she frowned at him. “I’ll have to check my calendar and get back to you.” She held the bag out to him.

“Gift wrap?” So innocent with his brows raised and eyes wide.

She snatched up a gift bag and two pieces of tissue paper, slammed them on the counter and said, “Do it yourself.” She grabbed the pile of books to file and headed to the stacks to her right without another glance at him.

Once behind the stacks she let out a silent sigh. Her heart was beating angrily against her chest and her brain worked to figure out what right she had to be so riled up.

After shoving a few books into place, she realized she hadn’t heard the door open. She poked her head around the stacks and saw Draco Malfoy behind the counter, pulling at a roll of gift wrapping paper.

“Malfoy!” She hurried to the desk and set the books down again, rushing around the counter and pushing at him. “You can’t be back here!”

“You said ‘do it yourself!’” he said, smirking.

“Ugh. Give me that!” She grabbed the roll of wrapping paper and moved to the other side of him to lay it out. “You don’t want a gift bag?” she whined.

“Well, Katya received that beautifully wrapped gift that you prepared last week, so I can’t go giving the rest of them second rate wrap-jobs. Best to be equal with things like this.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She tugged at the wrapping paper, pulled the book out of the shopping bag, and placed it on the counter. Draco still had not moved from his place behind the counter, so now he stood next to her as she tore the tape and pressed it against the fold.

“How’s your dragon project going?”

She looked up at him. He was watching her. Again, she had the sneaking feeling that somehow, *he* was the dragon.

“Er… fine.” She folded the other side of the book. “I submitted my initial proposal yesterday, so Mathilda will review it and make the necessary adjustments before submitting it to Kingsley – er, Minister Shacklebolt.”

“And have you sat down with the Minister, to discuss it?”

She looked up at him, and found that he was less than a foot from her, his entire body facing her, leaning against the counter.

“Um, no?” She frowned at him. “That’s what the proposal is for.”

He raised a brow at her. “You are close, personal friends with the Minister of Magic, having fought a war with him. If you can’t take the man to tea – or coffee – to discuss a passion project, then what good is that friendship?”

She grabbed up the ribbon. “How very Slytherin of you. A friendship cannot be just a friendship. You have to gain something from it, is that right, Malfoy?”

“And how very Gryffindor of you,” he said lowly. He stepped into her. “Bravely beginning something without any idea of how to get what you want.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She looked into his eyes and felt he was no longer talking about dragons. Her mind raced and she felt the side counter press against her right hip. He had her pinned again.

“All good down here?” Morty’s voice and the squeak of the door. “Mr. Malfoy! What a pleasure again!”

The cool air returned as Draco stepped away from her and she watched his pink cheeks smile at Morty. She checked her timepiece as the two men chatted and saw it was now five past six. Wonderful. She turned her eyes on the pile of books she still needed to file back.

“Granger was finishing wrapping up a gift for me. I do believe I’ve kept her past normal hours, though. I apologize.”

Hermione scoffed. *Apologize*. She felt Draco turn his eyes on her as she pulled her wand and pointed it at the *Open* sign, turning it to *Closed*.

“No problem at all, my boy.” Morty grabbed up the stack of books.

“Oh, no, Morty. I can file those—“ she tried.

“Nonsense. Finish with Mr. Malfoy here, and I’ll get these started.” Morty disappeared into the fiction section.

Draco had still not removed himself from behind the counter and now stared down at her. She frowned at him and turned back to the gift he planned to give to one of his girls. She cut the ribbon, pulled it around the book, twisted it up, and tied the ends. She leaned across him, ignoring the way her ribs brushed against his side, and snatched up the shopping bag. She dropped the book in and pushed it into his arms.

“Thank you for shopping at Cornerstone Books,” she deadpanned. He raised a brow at her and she pushed past him, bodies touching again, and went to help Morty file the books.

~*~

The whole of next week had Hermione pretending not to check the society pages, but failing miserably. There were no other sightings of Draco out with other women, and she didn’t know if that made her happy, or anxious. Was Katya the *one* if he wasn’t dating the others anymore? She shook herself, and promised not to think of Draco again that week.

“Ginny.” She slammed the door to their flat and Ginny looked up at her from the couch. “I’d like to date.”

Ginny chewed her grilled cheese, swallowed, and said, “That’s very kind, Hermione, but I’m seeing Harry right now. Maybe if we break up?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and tossed her bag on the chair. “I think it’s time for me to date.”

“Really?” Ginny’s wide eyes roved over her face.

“Yes.” Hermione stared at her. Ginny stared back. Hermione said, “So, what do I do now?”

Ginny giggled. “Well, I can compile a list for you, of blokes who are single and might interest you.”

“Good. Yes.” Hermione placed her hands on her hips.

“But generally, you just ask them if they’re interested in grabbing a drink, or a cup of tea.”

“*I* ask them?”

“Yes, Hermione. It’s almost the 21st century, you know,” Ginny said. Hermione huffed. “Now, shall I only list the blonde, former Death Eater assholes for you? Or have your interests expanded?”

“No, no.” Hermione scowled at her. “I have resolved myself not to think about Draco Malfoy any longer. It’s simply a waste of time.”

Ginny gave her a small grin. “Good for you.”

Of course, that was Monday. And by Tuesday, Harry had invited her to lunch in the café – “they’re now serving *almond croissants*, Hermione!” – and they had run into Draco there. Harry, as polite and clueless as expected, invited him to sit with them. She mainly sipped her coffee while listening to the two of them discuss the Quidditch scrimmage this coming weekend. It was Halloween on Sunday, she remembered, and she knew Harry was filling the day to keep his mind off of the anniversaries it represented.

“You’ll be at the match, right?”

Hermione stirred her coffee, plucking pieces of her croissant. She waited for a voice, and when no answer came, she looked up and found both boys staring at her.

“What? I’m sorry. Me?” Her cheeks burned.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “You’ll come to the match on Halloween? I think all the departments are coming out, whether or not their team is playing.”

“I—I mean, I could, yes,” she stammered. “I’ll have work at ten, but –“

“Cornerstone is open on Halloween?” Draco said.

She looked at him and blinked. “Oh, I guess… I guess not.”

“Great!” Harry smiled. “We’ll slaughter Magical Transportation, and then we’ll all go for a drink!”

“Great.” Hermione was less than thrilled.

~*~

The rest of the week flew by. Ginny wasted no time in connecting her with Rolf Scamander, someone she had a true fascination with, but ultimately no chemistry. They had a wonderful three-hour chat over drinks about everything from her dragon project to the steady extinction of the Golden Snidgets, but when the date was over, Hermione realized they had not gotten to know each other at all.

Rita Skeeter disagreed. Her society pages on Friday featured a picture of their animated discussion of his grandfather’s work with Grindylows, stating that they had really “hit it off,” and that she seemed to be recovering from the sting of Draco Malfoy’s rejection.

Mathilda had a chance to meet with her on Friday regarding her Gringotts proposal, and unfortunately a lot of her critiques reflected exactly what Malfoy had told her regarding the goblins not wanting to cooperate.

“From what I understand about the goblins,” Mathilda said, tossing her hair up into a bun and missing several locks in the process, “they really would prefer to continue doing things exactly as they’ve always done. The next dragon has been selected already and is being transported to the Wales reserve for… training.” Mathilda grimaced.

“What?” Hermione jumped. “They are already blinding and torturing another dragon?”

“Well, it has been a year and half, Hermione.” She sighed. “They have a business to run.”

“What about my thoughts on Auror protection of the lower vaults, or giving house elves new opportunities to work at Gringotts, retrieving items from vaults only they can enter?”

“The goblins won’t want wizards involved in their security, and you know better than anyone that house elves can be… swayed, when they are loyal to someone outside.” Mathilda closed the folder, and Hermione felt the *flap* like the life being cut off from the project. “I’m sorry, Hermione. The goblins want their beast.”

That put Hermione in a foul mood for the rest of the day. Narcissa and she had been penning notes back and forth for the past week, and not even the arrival of the slanted cursive note, inviting her to lunch next week, could cheer her. She wrote back, saying she’d love to meet, and that Monday at noon was perfect for her.

By the time 5:30PM on Saturday rolled around, Hermione was ready for a day off. Especially when Draco walked into Cornerstone whistling.

She scowled at him. “Draco, just because Skeeter *writes* that you visit Cornerstone every Saturday, doesn’t mean that you *have* to.”

She turned and grabbed his reserved bag, slamming it on the counter harder than she anticipated. She glanced up at him and he shot her a wary look.

“Why, you look positively *feral* today, Granger. Something new with your hair?”

She glared. “Will you be needing this gift wrapped, sir?”

“Naturally,” he said. She drew up the ledger and began flipping pages. It had been tucked away for hours due to the slowness of the day before the holiday. “Your meeting with Mathilda didn’t go as planned, eh?”

Her hands paused and she looked up at him. “How did you know?”

“I hear things.” He raised a brow at her. She frowned, wondering if Mathilda was talking about her with others. Robards, maybe?

“She thinks the goblins won’t compromise, that they want a beast,” she said. She pulled out the book and began writing the title.

“That’s too bad. You’ll think of something else.”

She was about to respond but then saw the title. It was a children’s book, similar to *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, but less respected.

She glanced up at him. “Could your girl not handle the fiction?” He smirked at her. She looked down at the book, pondering. “We could also wrap up a dictionary for her?” She turned innocent eyes on him and he leaned his elbows down on the counter.

“No, no. If she learned bigger words, then we’d have to communicate more.”

“Of course.” Hermione shook her head and tugged at the roll of wrapping paper, pulling scissors to cut it for the small size of the book. “If she likes this one, Draco, there is another I’d recommend. *A is for Acid Pops, B is for Broom, C is for Centaurs*. It’s a best seller for that reading level.”

She laid the book on the paper and began folding in the sides.

“You’ve started calling me Draco,” he drawled, and her hands stilled. Was it a question?

She looked up at him, finding his eyes on her, and quickly looked back down. She pushed a few stray curls back and said, “Well, I guess… your mother calls you Draco, so…”

“Yeah, I can’t get her to stop doing that,” he quipped.

She fought the smile that wanted to split her lips, and kept her eyes on the wrapping paper. His thumb and index finger were playing with the Slytherin ring on his left thumb, inches from where she was folding the small book into the orange and black paper. Halloween themed. She could feel his eyes on her fingers, making her so self-conscious that she slipped on the fold a few times and needed to try again. She reached for the tape.

“I’ve not had the opportunity to meet Rolf Scamander, but I hear he’s a fascinating bloke.”

The tape wrapped around Hermione’s fingers, winding and becoming useless. She looked up at him and his eyes were on her face.

“I… Yes, I mean, I hadn’t met him before either,” she stammered and looked down. “He’s very open to discussing his grandfather’s legacy, so I found him quite… er, quite fascinating.”

She ripped the crumbled tape from her fingers and realized for the first time that she could be using spells for all this gift wrapping. It was just second nature to her to do it the Muggle way. Perhaps that was why Draco watched her hands whenever she wrapped.

Only now he was watching her face. Watching her face and talking about the bloke she’d been out with two days ago. She was unsure if she should elaborate on the date with Rolf. She could tell him the truth – that they were going to get together again, as friends – or she could embellish the date a bit. Maybe saying nothing was better?

She heard the front door open, and decided to say nothing and continue wrapping quickly, hoping she could usher Draco out and hurry along whoever it was who decided to come to Cornerstone at twenty minutes until closing. Draco, of course, seemed to be in no rush, still leaning on the counter comfortably.

“Good evening,” Hermione said, and leaned around Draco’s form to welcome the newcomer. Her face paled when she saw Ron Weasley standing in the doorway, looking back and forth between her and the Slytherin. “Ron. Hi.” She smiled tightly.

She felt Draco’s eyes flip up to her, before he straightened and turned to glance at Ron behind him. Hermione watched as the two of them stared at each other with hard eyes.

“Well, what do you know,” Draco murmured to her as he turned back around. “They *do* get the paper in Ireland.”

Her eyes flickered to Draco and saw a satisfied smirk. She looked back at Ron and he was glaring at Draco’s back.

If this were a normal situation, which it was clearly not, she would give Ron a hug. She would actually run into her best friend’s arms – her best friend that she had not seen in a month. But seeing as her fingers were currently holding the fold on the gift Draco Malfoy was planning to give to one of his seven girlfriends, she was stuck behind the counter. She made the decision to release the fold, and walk – not run – around the desk, passing Draco, and hug Ron as he stepped up to the main landing.

“Happy Halloween,” he said stiffly into her ear.

“H-Happy Halloween, yes.” She pulled away after a rather unimpressive hug, intending to walk back to the wrapping paper and get Draco Malfoy out of her shop as soon as humanly possible. But Ron held onto her hips, holding her to him. She let her arms hang limp, but then decided to place them on his elbows. “What—what are you doing here?”

She almost winced at her choice of words, but then saw that Ron's attention was directed elsewhere. She didn't dare look at Draco while Ron's hands were firm on her hips.

"I told you I'd be back around Halloween." Ron looked down at her, and for the first time he smiled his warm smile, spreading to his eyes.

But it was too intimate. His hands on her hips, standing barely a foot apart, smiling down at her, with Draco still in her peripheral sight. She cast Ron a small smile and stepped backwards, out of his grasp, and journeyed back around the counter.

"How long are you here for?" It was odd, having a conversation without Draco in it when he was standing in between them, but the two of them hadn't verbally acknowledged each other yet.

"Just until tomorrow night."

Hermione nodded and retraced the fold in the wrapping paper with shaking fingers. With nothing else to do, Ron looked at Draco.

"Malfoy." A greeting of sorts.

"Weasley," Draco drawled. She noticed that Draco was leaning casually on the counter again. "Excellent game last week."

Hermione looked between the two of them. From what she remembered, Ireland had lost last weekend. From the way Ron was scowling at Draco, it seemed she remembered correctly.

She tried to change the subject. "So, you'll be here tomorrow morning for the Quidditch scrimmage? You can sit with me and Katie Bell." Her voice was higher than normal.

"No, actually," Ron said. Hermione looked up at him, and found him looking at Draco. "I just finished speaking with Harry and Mr. Acorn. Seems like Magical Transport's Keeper has fallen ill today, and instead of canceling the event all together, Acorn's asked me to step in tomorrow."

Hermione looked back and forth between the two men. Draco's smirk was just turning up the corners of his mouth, and Ron's brows raised in challenge. She suddenly felt quite ill, herself. Perhaps she should faint. Then all of this would stop.

"Oh, wonderful," she said, when no one responded.

"Yes, wonderful," Draco said. "It's so nice that they'll let in just anybody… when there's a need like that."

Ron frowned at him. "Yes, evidently," he directed at Draco.

Hermione grabbed up the black ribbon to tie around Draco's gift. It was best to separate these two, she realized. That caught Ron's eye and he stepped up to the counter, standing next to Draco.

“Buying a Halloween gift for someone?”

Hermione took a breath and begged her fingers to cooperate as they spun around the small wrapped book.

“Yes,” Draco said. “Someone special to me.”

Hermione let out a laugh. She looked up and both men were looking at her. She tightened the ribbon as her cheeks reddened. She grabbed up a bag and tossed the wrapped gift inside and held it out to Draco.

“Here. Thank you.” Please leave.

“Oh, thank *you*, Granger.” He smiled at her with his teeth, and she wished it wasn’t for show. He turned to Ron and said, “I’ll see you on the field tomorrow, Weasley.”

“Looking forward to it, Malfoy.”

Draco nodded at her once, then leaned across Ron, grabbing up a mint from the dish. Hermione watched as Ron’s eyes rested on those mints for a second too long.

“’Til tomorrow.” And Malfoy walked out, quite proud of himself.

Ron looked up from the mints to her.

She smiled at him and asked him about his week in Prague.

~*~

Later that evening, after Hermione had successfully navigated any further conversation away from Draco Malfoy, Hermione sat in her living room with Ginny, Ron, and Harry, drinking wine and laughing. The three of them were discussing the scrimmage tomorrow, so Hermione sipped at her wine slowly and listened, hoping Harry and Ginny would not bring up Draco.

A tap on their window, and Ginny stood to open the glass for a large eagle owl that Hermione immediately recognized. Her heart skipped as it landed in front of her and dropped off a black and orange package, and turned and flew out.

“Hermione, what’s that?” Ginny bounced over to her.

The hastily tied black ribbon shined, and Hermione stared at it. What game was he playing? She plucked the small card from the top of the gift.

To my Saturday girl

If you need a dictionary for this, the harpy at Cornerstone Books said she’d gladly provide it.

D.M.

p.s. Have a second look at page 23.

Hermione reread the note four times. Ginny read it over her shoulder and looked up at her. It was silent in the room, and Hermione looked up to see Harry looking curiously at her, and Ron scowling.

This was about Ron. It had to be. That son of a bitch.

“What does that mean?” Ginny whispered, taking the card.

“It’s a game, that’s all.” Hermione stood from the couch and tugged at the bow, ripped at the Halloween wrapping paper she had wrapped herself, and found the children’s book Draco Malfoy had bought from her earlier today. She didn’t know why she hoped it was something different, seeing as she recognized her wrapping job, but she growled and went to the kitchen to throw the wrapping and bow in the trash.

She threw the book on the counter and glared at it.

Buying a Halloween gift for someone?

Yes, someone special to me.

He knew Ron would be with her when she received this. What in Merlin’s name was his problem!

She flipped to page 23. It was a children’s fable. She threw up her hands, exasperated.

Except this was on reserve, before she even got to work today. She glanced at the book. He had picked this out before he’d known Ron was coming into town.

She flipped a few pages, looked at the inside cover, shook the pages for any notes. She settled back on page 23. *The Chimaera*. She’d read this story before, or at least variations of it. A Chimaera lived alone in the woods, guarding a sparkling fountain that could cure all injuries. A wizard wants to take his sick father to the fountain, but first must befriend a goblin to help him. It was a wonderful little allegory for human and goblin interactions, so if he was trying to make a point about her bullheadedness regarding the goblins, fine. She’d take that. But why go through all of this just to poke at her.

Her eyes landed on a passage. The passage that explained that Chimaeras are naturally repelled by goblins, and only with the goblin by his side could the wizard pass the Chimaera.

Her heart stopped. A gasp tore its way from her throat.

“What!” Ginny appeared in the doorway. “What is it?”

Hermione looked at her with shining eyes.

“I have to go to the library!”

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for keeping this from you! It's nice and long to make up for the wait. :)

She'd spent the rest of the evening at the library, pulling books, newspaper clippings, and journals on Chimaeras and any relation to goblins. Though there was not much to be found, there was enough to put together a solid case for bringing a Chimaera into Gringotts. There would not have to be any torture or training, as Chimaeras are naturally fierce and antagonistic. Except to goblins. Wizards could securely access their vaults at Gringotts as long as a goblin was with them at all times.

She quarreled with whether or not to pen a thank you note to Draco. He clearly had two intentions with sending that book. One - to help her; two - to anger Ron. After four drafts, she decided against it, and would thank him in person. If the opportunity arose.

When she saw Ron the next morning before the game, he was his normal self again. There was no indication that he had been troubled by Draco Malfoy the day before. Ginny kept trying to communicate with Hermione with her eyes, but Hermione just shook her head and told her they'd talk later. She knew she'd seen Draco's initials on that note, so there would be no getting around explaining to Ginny why Draco Malfoy had sent her a gift with a note calling her his *Saturday girl*.

Ridiculous.

She went with Harry, Ron, and Ginny to Hodgley Field at 7AM, and while they warmed up and got dressed, she picked out a place in the stands for Katie and her to sit. She brought a book, of course, and cast a warming charm on herself. Katie arrived around 7:30AM as the rest of the crowd began filing in. Hermione was surprised to see so many people out this early on a Sunday, but she supposed she didn't fully understand the fascination with Quidditch anyway.

“Hello, there!” Katie ambled up the bleachers, and Hermione stood to guide her up. Katie batted her away. “I’m not so pregnant I can’t see my feet!” She laughed. “Not yet anyway!”

“How’s everything going? With the baby?”

“Excellent.” Katie sat and began unpacking a bag, handing Hermione a bag of popcorn for them both. “My sister just had her first last year, so I’ve got the inside scoop for all the tricks and potions.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.”

Katie smiled and waved at someone Hermione didn’t recognize. Hermione caught a glimpse of Aiden and a few other Magical Creatures coworkers settling in a few sections over. She still could not believe how many people were here. She saw a flash go off, and to her right she found Bozo and Skeeter.

“What is the press doing here? Isn’t it just a scrimmage?” Hermione said.

“They’ll have photographers here every now and then. It’s rather nice to see all of the Hogwarts alums back on the same field again, especially after Draco joined the team.” Katie munched her popcorn. “And I guess with Ron playing Keeper for the other team, it’s probably a nice newspaper opportunity.”

“Hm.” Hermione scowled at Skeeter.

“So, they tell me not to have too much chocolate while pregnant,” Katie said, turning to her bag, “but if you drink some too, I feel like I could get away with it.” Katie pulled out two thermoses and offered one to Hermione. “Hot cocoa?”

Hermione smiled and took it. “Thanks.”

Katie smiled and tucked her chin into her scarf as a wind gusted past them.

“Katie,” Hermione started. “Can I ask you who the father is?”

Katie laughed and turned to her. “Merlin, how long have you been holding that in?”

“About six weeks.” Hermione smiled. “I don’t mean to pry. I’m just curious.”

“Of course. Not at all.” Katie pushed her hair away from her face. “I actually had a donor.”

Hermione was not expecting this at all. She blinked at Katie. “Really? I- I mean, do they have magical options for women in the Wizarding World?”

“I had it done the Muggle way.” Katie grinned, and her hand absently came up to her stomach.

“Oh! How … how nice!” Hermione smiled at her. Katie gave her a sly grin.

“You want to know why, don’t you?” Katie said.

“Terribly so.” Hermione gave a nervous laugh. “I’ve never heard of someone seeking out a donor at twenty-one.”

“Twenty, actually,” Katie said. “My birthday is in December.” Katie’s eyes glazed as she looked out over the empty field. “With the War, and watching so many people I loved die, I just decided that I didn’t want to waste any more time before getting what I want. I want a family. I want to be a mother. And I decided to get it.”

“What if…” Hermione stopped and rephrased. “Do you fear that you’ve moved too quickly? If that perfect man that wants a family as well comes along—“

“Then we’ll have another. The ‘perfect’ man would be ‘perfectly’ fine with dating and wedding a single mother, don’t you think?” Katie smiled at her. She was so confident, as if she’d answered these questions thousands of times.

“I believe so.” Hermione laughed. “I applaud you for going after what you want.”

“Thank you,” Katie said, taking a sip from her cocoa. “I felt like, I’ve come this far. I’ve fought in a war, I chose the winning side. I shouldn’t have to wait or settle. Those are the two most damaging things a person could do.”

Hermione was struck. She stared at Katie as she wiped cocoa off her lips and marveled at her getting what she wanted. She was brave. Gryffindor brave. Hermione let her mind ruminate on waiting and settling. She agreed. Quite damaging.

As if on cue, twelve broomsticks shot out of the cabins, blonde and ginger heads immediately spotted. The friends, family and co-workers in the stands cheered, stomping their feet. Katie stood and yelled something, some chant that other D.M.L.E. officers joined her on. Hermione clapped and whooped, mentally preparing herself for a Quidditch match.

“I think you may be the only person in the history of the magical community that doesn’t like Quidditch, Hermione Granger.” Katie looked down at her, laughing.

“I like Quidditch just fine!” Hermione yelled over the crowd.

“You’re lying!” Katie sat back down and knocked her elbow playfully. Hermione grinned.

Oliver Wood grabbed his broom and headed to the center of the field.

“Thank Merlin Oliver Wood is back in England.” Katie said, grabbing some popcorn from her bag. She offered the container to Hermione.

“Thank Merlin for Oliver Wood!” Hermione grabbed a handful of popcorn, and Katie laughed, wiggling her eyebrows.

The players lined up in a circle in the air around Oliver, and Hermione spotted Draco looking surly next to Harry, so different from the flirt who asked for books to be gift wrapped. His face was set. She scowled at him, examining him. Oliver was giving a pre-game pep-talk, and the whole group laughed at something he said, all except Draco. He was adjusting his gloves.

Hermione watched as he held his broom steady with just his thighs while his hands were busy. She swallowed.

Movement from the right drew her attention. Ron was waving at her. She lifted her arm to wave back. He beamed.

Oliver Wood dove down to the box holding the balls. When the Bludgers flew up and the Quaffle was tossed, Hermione had a thought.

“Katie, when does the game end if there is no Snitch to catch?”

Katie threw more popcorn into her mouth and replied, “It’s a timed game instead. So, they play until the timer runs out.” Her eyes were flitting across the field, catching all the nuances that Hermione would never understand.

“And how long is the game?” Hermione realized she had no idea how much of her day would be spent here at the field.

“Usually around six hours.” Katie grabbed her hot cocoa.

“Six hours?!” Hermione squawked.

Katie was laughing. “Relax, Hermione! It’s only an hour and a half.” Katie was still giggling as Hermione glowered at her. “You looked like a Grindylow had stolen your galleons!”

Hermione humphed and sipped her cocoa. She tried to follow the Quaffle, asking Katie a few times where it had gotten to, but found it infinitely easier to follow Harry and Ginny, and infinitely more interesting to follow Draco. It had been so long since she’d gotten to watch him fly. He had retreated from Quidditch in their sixth year, and Umbridge had made everything so unpleasant in fifth, and the Tri-Wizard Tournament had canceled the sport in fourth. She’d never gotten to see how good he’d gotten. He flew so differently from Harry. He was more precise.

She watched him spin the Quaffle to Ginny as a Bludger rocketed towards him. Hermione gasped as he dipped at the last moment, the Bludger grazing his ear. Katie looked at her.

Ginny curved the ball toward the left hoop, and Ron missed it by inches. Half the stands cheered as the D.M.L.E. scored the first points. Ron and Ginny shared words in the air, while Harry laughed. Oliver Wood dove to grab the Quaffle and bring it up to Ron, as he had no intention of doing anything but argue with Ginny.

Once the ball was back in play, Katie said, “It’s so odd seeing Draco Malfoy in red, don’t you think?”

Hermione was, of course, already watching him, so she adjusted her eyes to take in his whole appearance. The D.M.L.E. chosen color was red, as they were mostly Gryffindors. The Department of Magical Transportation had chosen a lavender color, which was clashing wonderfully with Ron’s hair. But Draco… looked good in anything.

“I guess so. He’s more of a Gryffindor these days than most, though.” Hermione laughed at bit as Harry dodged a Bludger and tossed the Quaffle to Draco.

“How are things with you and him?” Katie asked. Hermione took her eyes off Draco as he swerved around the D.M.T.’s Chasers, and checked in with Katie. She was eyeing her over the top of her cocoa, innocence written across her brow.

“Me and Malfoy?”

“Yeah. Do you see him much?”

“Well, he and his mother frequent Cornerstone Books, so I run into him on occasion.” Hermione played with the open-close flip on her thermos.

“And how is that?” Katie was still watching her.

“Tense, at times.” Hermione laughed. “But in general, there’s a sense of moving forward.” Hermione looked up in time to see Draco chuck the Quaffle toward the hoops. Ron came in at the last second to bat it away. Ron gave him a smug grin and Draco immediately turned and headed down the field, waiting for the play to start.

“You’re becoming friendly with Narcissa Malfoy I hear?” Katie twisted the top off her thermos and added more hot cocoa with her wand. “That must be interesting!”

“’Challenging’, is more the word.” Hermione laughed. “She originally just wanted to invite me to tea to thank me for speaking at her son’s trial. She’s quite kind actually.”

“That’s nice to hear. I’ve never met her before.” Katie dropped some marshmallows into her cocoa and twisted the cap back on. Hermione noticed that Katie’s attention had fully left the game. “And the three of you spend time together? I couldn’t help but see the pictures from Fortescue’s.”

“Oh,” Hermione laughed. “That was… an odd, one-time thing. Narcissa wanted to see me on my lunch break at Cornerstone, and Malfoy was with her that day.” She watched as the D.M.L.E. Keeper let the Quaffle slip by him, allowing ten points to Magical Transport. The stands cheered and groaned, all but Katie Bell. “It was… completely random.”

“Or completely intentional.” Katie raised her brows at Hermione.

Hermione was about to respond when the group to their right gasped. She looked up in time to see Ron catch the Quaffle hurtling toward the right hoop, but duck at the last moment as a Bludger aimed for him smashed through the hoop. The wood splintered and sprayed everywhere, leaving just the post behind. Oliver blew his whistle and asked for a pause so they could repair the hoop.

The clock stopped and Oliver froze the Bludgers in midair. Ginny and some of the other players stayed in the air, but others made their way to the ground to grab water.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a match pause. I mean, other than when Dementors attack, or when someone enchants a Bludger,” Hermione said.

“I’d say any game where Harry Potter is involved is always an exception to the rule.” Katie laughed. “No, they don’t usually pause, but professional Quidditch pitches have reinforced hoops, not wooden ones. So, this wouldn’t usually happen.”

Hermione looked down and saw that both Draco and Ron had dropped down to the field and had dismounted. Harry was drifting down too. From a distance, it looked like Draco and Ron were talking, which was… different. Then she saw Ron cock his head in her direction. She froze.

“Interesting,” Katie said next to her.

Harry was dismounting his broom a few paces away. Ginny was circling above, looking down at them, then looking at her in the stands. Ron took a step in to Draco. Draco remained very still, waiting. Then Ron shoved him. And then there was chaos.

Harry ran the twenty paces to them as Ginny dove. The people in the stands murmured. Draco regained his footing and said something back to Ron. Ron responded by punching him in the face.

“Oh! Ron!” Hermione stood. She ran down the bleachers, hopping over the onlookers who had started cheering on the fight. She could hear Katie on her heels and the clicking of the camera to her right. Hermione reached the wall at the edge of the pitch just as Draco rammed into Ron, taking him to the ground.

“Stop!” Hermione yelled. Ginny hit the ground running as Harry pulled Draco off Ron. Hermione had never seen Draco in a real fight. Usually Crabbe and Goyle had taken charge in these situations and Draco had escaped to whine about his injuries. She’d never seen him hit someone in the face like she was currently watching him hit Ron.

Hermione started moving to the entrance to the field, but Katie grabbed her arm. “They’ve got it Hermione. Just sit back and enjoy the ride!” Katie’s face was beaming.

“What?” Hermione was breathless, looking between Katie and the boys. A flash went off to her right and she turned to see Bozo taking a picture of *her*! She looked back to the field. Harry had pulled Draco back by the arms but Ginny hadn’t gotten to Ron yet, so he charged at them both. Ron sucker punched Draco in the stomach while Harry had his arms restrained. Harry looked affronted while Draco slumped to the ground, gasping for air.

“Ron! Stop it!” Hermione tried to run to the field again, but Katie grabbed her again.

“Don’t you wonder who it is that’s gotten them in such a tizzy, Hermione?” Katie was smiling at the field.

“Oh, I know *exactly* what’s happening here, and it’s completely juvenile!” Hermione pouted.

Ginny stood in front of Ron, pushing on his chest. Harry helped Draco up, shielding him from Ron. As the boys were pulled further apart from each other, Ron yelled across the distance.

“Stay the hell away from her!”

Heat danced up Hermione’s back. Ginny looked at her, and Katie squeezed her arm, laughing. Ron finally looked back to the stands and found her there at the edge of the pitch. His eyes burned into hers as she gaped at him. He turned and headed to the opposite stands. Oliver Wood, who had missed the whole thing from being up in the air fixing the hoop, sensed that someone should be with Ron and followed him over.

Hermione stared down to the left and saw Harry taking Draco to the cabins. She looked at Ginny, who was standing in the middle of the field with her hands on her hips, breathing hard. They made eye contact and Ginny’s face split into a huge grin. Katie laughed again.

“I… I still have no idea what everyone thinks is so funny. That was totally barbaric.” Hermione shook her head and looked at Katie.

“Well, Hermione,” Katie said. “Oliver Wood might have been the referee of the match today, but it seems like you get to decide who won.” Katie smiled brightly.

Hermione blinked at her. She looked to Ron with Oliver Wood’s hand on his shoulder across the field, and then to the cabins where Draco and Harry were disappearing, the rest of the D.M.L.E. team following.

She turned to Katie, who was wiggling her brows at her. Hermione frowned. “You tell me. To wait or to settle.” She turned from Katie and headed back up the stands to gather her belongings.

~*~

The game was effectively postponed. Skeeter tried to interview her as she stomped over to the cabins, but Hermione found that silence was the best remedy for Rita Skeeter.

“Miss Granger! Which of these dashing gentlemen has your heart? Have you told Ron Weasley about your romance with Draco Malfoy? Is he still waiting on your response to his proposal? Do you think either of these men truly won that fight?”

“I think they’re both morons,” Hermione mumbled as she outpaced Skeeter and her ridiculous heels, sinking into the grass.

“What? What was that? Miss Granger?”

Hermione ignored her and continued. She approached the cabin door just as Draco and Harry exited it. Draco’s eye was swollen and cut along the brow. There was bruise forming on his jaw as well. Harry saw her marching over and quickly stepped to the side. Smart man.

“Are you alright?” She stopped in front of Draco. His hair was wet from the shower.

He looked at her and tightened his jaw. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” She shoved at his shoulders. “What the hell is wrong with you?!”

He stumbled in surprise and his back landed against the door of the cabin.

“Me?”

“Yes! Why are you giving Skeeter more ammunition?!” She shoved him again. “You know the pictures of you two *brawling* will be all over the papers tomorrow!”

“And what makes you think that was all about you, Granger?” he hissed at her and stepped off the door. She held her ground.

“Of *course* it was about me, because *you* can’t leave well enough alone!”

“For your information, I’ve been aching to pop him since the day we met.”

“Yes, and I’m sure whatever you said to get him to hit you first had nothing to do with me. You’ve been baiting him all weekend!”

“Baiting him? I sure I don’t know what you mean—“

“Oh, please, Malfoy. The *mint*?” she said. He hid a smirk and bit his tongue between his teeth.

“Those *are* my favorite mints, Granger. However did you know?” His voice lilted.

“And you knew he’d be with me when your *present* arrived –“

“And you’re welcome for that, by the way,” he smirked. “Or have you not figured it out yet.”

She gasped. “’Have I not figured it out!?’ Of *course*, I have! Even someone as vapid as your *Tuesday* girl could figure that out –“

“Oh, I was curious, seeing as I received no ‘thank you’ card –“

“Well *thank you*, Malfoy, for swooping in and *saving* me from my ignorance—“

“It’s back to Malfoy, is it? I thought we were getting somewhere, Granger.”

“Yes, when you’re being an absolute *moron*, it’s Malfoy.”

“And when is it Draco?”

“When you’re being an absolute *asshole*!” She shoved his shoulders again. “Don’t you *dare* bring me into this petty behavior again.” She pointed a finger at his face.

“I didn’t bring you into it at all, Granger. He did.”

“If you want to hit him, hit him. Don’t use me to get him to hit you first,” she hissed.

On cue, a bulb flashed to her left. She turned and found the camera, Skeeter, and Harry, Ginny and several other members of both teams watching them.

“I apologize that your game was ruined,” she said. She marched off just as Ron and Oliver Wood were heading into the other cabins.

“Hermione—“ Ron’s voice.

“Don’t start, Ronald Weasley!” She growled at him and continued off the field.

~*~

The rest of the day was ruined. She said goodbye to a smirking Katie Bell and went straight to the library to continue drafting her new proposal. Her goal was to lay it on Mathilda’s desk the following morning and demand a meeting the following day. She penned a note to Kingsley asking if they could meet tomorrow afternoon. Her determination distracted her from the overwhelming desire to hit someone herself.

She came home just before dinner time, and found Harry and Ron still in her living room. They both stopped talking when she entered and looked up at her. Ginny popped her head out from the kitchen.

“Dinner, Hermione?”

“No, thank you.” Her stomach grumbled. She turned to Ron. “Didn’t you have to leave tonight?”

“Yeah,” Ron stood and dragged his eyes off the carpets. “I wanted to say goodbye before I left.”

“Goodbye.” Hermione turned and headed toward her bedroom. She tossed her bag on the bed and flipped on the lights with her wand. She heard the door creak and turned to scowl at a very small looking Ron Weasley leaning against her door frame.

“I’m sorry.” He pouted.

“For?” She placed her hands on her hips.

“…for whatever you’re mad at me for.”

She threw her hands up and growled. “Not good enough, Ron!”

“Look, I don’t know what to say!” He stepped into the room and left the door cracked just enough for Harry and Ginny to inevitably eavesdrop. “You should have heard what he said about you, Hermione. You would have punched him too!”

She felt a blush run up her neck. “Then *let me* punch him!”

“I was defending you –“

“No, you were staking your claim,” she said. He looked up at her. “I don’t know what you think is going on here—“

“I saw the papers,” he said. “I’ve seen the pictures of you both.”

“Oh, wonderful!” she quipped. “You know, Skeeter printed that *Harry* and I were dating when we were fourteen, and that was true as well!”

Ron looked at the ground. Hermione stepped closer to him and touched his arm.

“Ron, I want to make sure that we’re clear,” she said quietly. “You and I are not dating.” He looked up at her. “It’s impossible to do so at this time, and… and I don’t think it’s what we’d want anyway.” He opened his mouth, and before he could say anything they’d regret about him wanting her, she said, “And I’m going to begin seeing people.” He closed his mouth. “You can’t come punch people in the face whenever you see me pictured in the paper with them.”

He nodded. He looked at her face, searching. “So, there’s nothing going on with you and Draco Malfoy?”

Hermione looked into his blue eyes and thought of a Slytherin ring handing her a drink, grey eyes flashing at her, warming her, a silver voice whispering *You think that’s why they call you the Golden Girl?*, the ghost of a hand guiding her across the street, the press of her hip against the Cornerstone counter as his body invaded her space… and the heat of his breath on her face as he hissed the number 35,000 at her.

The moments that were only moments, and not enough to wait for, not enough to pin a dream on.

She blinked and did not lie. “There is nothing going on between Malfoy and me.”

After that, Ron left. He’d hugged her and smiled sadly as he pulled her door closed. She stood there, listening to him make plans with Ginny for Christmas, and truly felt for the first time in almost ten years like she and Ron Weasley would not be getting married and having children one day. She felt a loss, but not so sharp as the one nagging at her now that she’d taken stock of her “relationship” with Draco Malfoy.

Perhaps she should contact Rita Skeeter. She would be devastated to hear that neither gentleman was her chosen beau. She laughed at herself as a knock rapped on the door.

Harry leaned against the door frame. “He’s gone.”

Hermione nodded, and turned to fold some clothes. Harry was the only one she knew who chose to do certain household chores the Muggle way, like her.

“You know,” he continued, “I didn’t get it for the longest time.”

She looked back at him, raising her brows in question, picking up clothing to fold.

“I thought… well, I thought it was very odd… and unlike you.”

“Harry, what--?”

“But I saw you together today. And I think I get it now.”

Hermione frowned at him. “Saw…?”

“You and Malfoy.”

Her hands stopped folding the jeans she was working on. “Saw us? What do you mean?”

He looked at his shoes. Trainers, she realized, and her heart warmed at the normalcy.

“You’re very alike. Both well-read, both passionate. And when you fight…. It’s not like with you and Ron. And I think I get it now.”

He looked back up at her and smiled lightly.

“There’s nothing to get,” she said softly. “Malfoy and I do not have a relationship.”

Harry blinked at her, and looked at his shoes again. “Okay.”

She turned and continued folding her jeans. She heard him close the door.

~*~

The date on the paper read November 1, 1999. Today was the day Draco was to announce his consulting firm, wooing the entire wizarding world with how far he’d come and how ambitious he was. Instead, he was punching Ron Weasley in the face.

“THE FIGHT FOR HERMIONE GRANGER’S HEART!”
by Rita Skeeter

Hermione frowned. Her head hurt. The article featured some wonderful pictures of the fight, but several more of Hermione standing at the edge of the field with Katie, Hermione shoving Draco, Hermione storming off the pitch.

What angered Hermione most about the article was its accuracy. There was nothing to fight with Skeeter over. The two boys *did* start a brawl on the Quidditch field and it *did* have something to do with her. Skeeter didn’t exaggerate anything.

Hermione shoved the paper into the rubbish bin. She took the Floo into work and ignored the staring and the conversations that would stop as she passed. She got to her desk and found seven Howlers waiting for her. She frowned. She sent them into the conference room and cast a silencing charm.

After thirty minutes of enduring the Ron Weasley Fan Club, the Society for the Preservation of Draco Malfoy’s Lineage, and a few Quidditch enthusiasts who were really looking forward to yesterday’s game, Hermione finally got to turn in her proposal to Mathilda. She returned to her desk to find a note from Narcissa, requesting that they meet somewhere private for their lunch that afternoon, and suggested a little shop in Muggle London, surprisingly.

Hermione was more surprised that Narcissa still even wanted to meet. If Hermione was having a day like today, Draco and Narcissa must be swamped as well.

Hermione arrived at the coffee shop and found Narcissa tucked into a corner next to a bookshelf. She was dressed as "Muggle" as Narcissa Malfoy could manage, but still looked the epitome of grace and fashion.

"Oh, Hermione, dear," Narcissa stood and pulled her in. "What a day I'm sure you must be having."

"Yes," Hermione said, pulling back. "It's been trying. But what about you? Wasn't Draco supposed to announce his consulting firm today?"

Narcissa pursed her lips together. "Yes. Yes, he was. And now it needs to be postponed at least a week." Narcissa shook her napkin onto her lap.

"I'm so sorry, Narcissa."

"Oh, it's not your fault. *You* didn't engage in a pissing contest in front of a camera." Narcissa pressed her hand to her temple, and Hermione's eyes widened at her language. "I apologize. I'm under a lot of stress."

Hermione hid a smile. "Not at all. And do let me know if there is anything I can do to help with… 'damage control.' I suspect that the best thing I *can* do is stay away though."

Narcissa's eyes sparkled and the waiter arrived. Narcissa ordered a tea for her and coffee for Hermione, but when the waiter asked about French press, drip, decaf, espresso, macchiato, Hermione watched Narcissa's brows shoot up in confusion. Hermione jumped in and just clarified that a regular coffee would be perfect with some milk.

Narcissa turned back to her and said, "Well, before the shenanigans of this weekend happened, I did want to invite you to lunch for a specific purpose, Hermione."

"Oh?" Hermione set the menu down to give Narcissa her full attention. Narcissa leveled her eyes on her.

"Hermione," she began, "You do know how grateful I am that you chose to speak at Draco's trial?"

Hermione blinked at her. "Oh… yes, of course. It was the right thing to do."

"You have really given him a second chance. This business – should it ever get off the ground," she mumbled, rolling her eyes and then continued, "will truly be an opportunity for Draco to prove himself. To set himself apart from the War. From Lucius's reputation. And I cannot thank you enough for that opportunity."

Hermione was so thankful that the waiter arrived with their coffee and tea and to take their order. She had never heard Narcissa talk about Lucius and she didn't know how to respond to this at all. She had a faint memory of Narcissa using her maiden name when placing books on reserve at Cornerstone. The waiter moved away and Hermione clutched at her coffee cup.

“I- Yes, I am so glad that Draco has this opportunity as well. He has a very keen eye for business opportunities.”

Narcissa sipped her tea, eyeing her over her cup. She set it down. “I have also told Lucius just how instrumental you have been in Draco’s new life. Your friendship and Mr. Potter’s friendship have been most influential.”

Hermione blinked at her. Narcissa continued.

“Lucius would like the opportunity to thank you for speaking at Draco’s trial as well.” Narcissa’s eyes glittered and Hermione felt very stiff. “I’ve also told him you are now a dear friend of mine, and that it would… behoove him to get to know you better.”

Narcissa added just a touch more sugar to her tea. She stirred with her spoon, and watched Hermione’s face.

“He would be honored if you would visit him at Azkaban this coming Saturday.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

I believe... *this* is the perfect chapter to announce that I plan to write a companion piece to The Right Thing To Do from Draco's perspective. A lot of you have asked for it, and while I know that more and more will be revealed in TRTTD as it continues, I think it will be a lot of fun to see more. I won't be starting it until after TRTTD is finished, and it won't go chapter by chapter with the original, but just provide more insight and fun. :)

Thank you again to everyone who has left reviews so far, and to those who read and think them in their heads. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From what Hermione understood about visiting privileges at Azkaban, those in medium security were allowed only one visit per month. When Hermione asked Narcissa about this, she brushed it off, saying that next month they were allowed a December visit and an option to see Lucius on Christmas Day, so she wasn't too concerned.

Hermione was. She was very concerned.

With Narcissa's blue eyes examining her over her teacup, there was no option to say no.

On Tuesday, she received a memo from Robards in the Auror Office requesting her assistance with another case. She had to postpone her follow-up meeting with Mathilda until the next day, but Mathilda did drop by her desk to mention that the Minister would be joining them tomorrow. She winked at her, and Hermione hated that Draco was right. Meeting with Kingsley on Monday afternoon had just secured her a project.

She entered the conference room upstairs and found Draco, as expected, examining maps and charts and all sorts of diagrams. He handed her a coffee as she settled in, explaining the case

and what it was they would work on. There was no indication that he was at all fazed by the Skeeter article the day before. And there was no indication that he had any sort of opinion about her visiting his father on Saturday.

Hermione ached to ask him, to maybe get advice, to figure out what Lucius wanted. To ask, "Draco, what's the best way to come out of a conversation with Lucius Malfoy alive?"

But perhaps he didn't know about it. And that confused her more.

"When will you announce now?" Hermione asked after an hour of silence.

His eyes flipped up to her, and he answered, "This coming Monday." That was all he said. He continued reading the chart he was on.

Hermione nodded. She would need to make sure nothing interesting happened over the weekend, so she would not ruin his announcement again. She supposed that meant that both parties needed to come out unharmed on Saturday.

~*~

What does one wear to meet Lucius Malfoy?

She was sure Ginny would have some ideas… if only she'd decided to tell Ginny what she was doing today. Ginny had been preparing all week for an out of town game with the Harpies. She'd been bumped to first string for the winter, and Hermione could see the stress and joy in her during the limited time they'd spent together, so she didn't bother telling her. It wasn't a big deal anyway. Lucius Malfoy wanted to thank her, in person, for speaking at his son's trial.

Hermione considered leaving a note, mentioning the location of her will and the key to her Gringotts vault.

She continued her attempt to plait her hair, while frowning at that morning's Skeeter article and picture. Draco and Katya had gone out again last night. They'd had dinner at a café followed by a few drinks at a classy bar. There were two pictures, one of the two of them talking over dinner – Draco laughing at something she said – and one of them at the Apparition point outside the bar. Draco had her pressed against the brick, his hand on her hip and her fingers in his hair. A much different kiss from the one pictured two weeks back. Skeeter mentioned that they did not Apparate home together. Thank Merlin for small miracles.

Hermione decided that if she could survive today's chat, she could probably survive a few more dates on her calendar, and promised herself to at least follow up with dear Rolf Scamander, if anything. The evening wouldn't end like Draco's had, but at least she'd be getting to know new blokes, training herself for dating.

She looked at herself in the mirror. As presentable as she could be, she penned a quick note to Morty, saying she had an appointment this morning at 9AM, but fully anticipated being there by opening.

Narcissa had suggested that Hermione come over just before so she could Floo from Malfoy Manor, which was already connected to the Azkaban fireplaces. The Floo Network would open precisely at 8:45AM and stay open for precisely three minutes. Earlier in the week Hermione had weaseled out of Harry that they would be having a Quidditch practice Saturday morning, even without Ginny, so Hermione was sure that Draco would not be at the Manor.

She looked at herself in the mirror again. She grabbed her bag and tossed the Floo powder into the fireplace.

"Malfoy Manor."

Mippy was waiting for her. The elf smiled so wide that Hermione almost laughed at the way the expression pulled her face.

"Miss Hermione Granger." Mippy greeted her and bent into a curtsey. "Mippy takes you to the library now."

Hermione smiled despite the curdling in her stomach, and followed the little elf that was wearing only a dress and fuzzy socks. They passed the grey busts of the Malfoy patriarchy, and Hermione avoided Lucius's grey stone eyes as Mippy opened the library doors.

"Hermione, dear." Narcissa stood. "You look lovely."

"Oh, thank you," Hermione blushed. She spent enough time on her appearance to warrant that compliment, she supposed. "Good morning, Narcissa."

Narcissa gestured for her to sit and offered her a coffee. Hermione said yes, and then considered whether caffeine would be a wise choice with the current state of her nerves.

As Mippy produced the coffee cup and saucer and then disappeared, she said, "Oh, Narcissa. I completely forgot that I meant to bring back those books I borrowed." She shook her head. "How silly of me."

"Oh, that's fine, dear," Narcissa waved her hand. "You'll just have to come back soon and exchange them for new ones!"

Narcissa smiled and sipped her tea. Narcissa seemed to think that Hermione would come out of this meeting unscathed, and that settled Hermione's stomach a bit. Either that or Narcissa would have Mippy retrieve the books from her flat after her body was buried.

She decided to take it easy on the caffeine.

Hermione turned to set her coffee cup down and stopped when she saw an ornate golden box on the side table. Its lid was open and the most decadent diamond ring she'd ever seen was resting in the folds of the fabric.

"Is this your ring, Narcissa?"

“At one point.” She appeared around Hermione’s shoulder, looking down at the ring. “I apologize for having it laid out like this. I need to take it in for altering.”

“It’s stunning,” Hermione said. She watched as the sides of the diamond twinkled with magic. She didn’t know much about diamonds or the cut of them, but this ring was remarkable.

“Thank you.” Narcissa’s voice floated over her shoulder. “It’s been in the Malfoy family for generations, passed down to each new fiancée.” The word rang in Hermione’s ears, as Narcissa continued, the ring glinting. She wondered how many diamonds were set in it. “I remember the day Lucius gave it to me. I was so angry with him that day because of some silly thing he'd said, and I was -- No, dear! Don't touch it!"

Hermione jumped. She looked around, trying to find the person who was reaching for the ring and found her own fingers inches away. Narcissa had jumped up and grabbed her arm.

"I--I... I don't know what just happened," Hermione stammered. "I'm *so* very sorry, Narcissa." Her face was hot and she couldn't look her in the eyes.

"No, no," Narcissa said, hand on her heart. "It's my fault, dear." She pressed the back of her fingers to her lips. "I should have known..." Narcissa leaned down to her and grabbed her shoulders. "It's not your fault, Hermione. There are... enchantments on the ring, to ward off..."

"Muggleborns." Hermione finished it for her.

"All non-pure-bloods." Narcissa breathed. "It has a bit of dark magic to attract those who might be cursed if they touched it.” Narcissa frowned down at the ring, and Hermione looked at a point over the woman’s shoulder, heat coursing through her from embarrassment. “That’s actually why I’m taking it in today – to have a curse-breaker look at it.”

“Again, I am so very sorry, Narcissa.”

“Oh, nonsense.” Narcissa ran her hands up and down Hermione’s arms, comforting in a way that made her miss her mother. “I shouldn’t have had it laid out like this. Mippy!”

Mippy popped in. “Yes, Mistress?”

“Mippy, please take the Malfoy ring to my study.”

Mippy snapped and the beautiful box floated over to her hands, just levitating above them, and Hermione wondered if the Malfoys had also cursed the ring against thieving house elves.

“The ring is very pretty, yes?” Mippy said, and it took a moment for Hermione to realize that the elf was talking to her. Mippy’s eyes were wide as they looked up at her.

“Oh, yes, absolutely.” Hermione smiled down at her.

“It belongs to Master Draco now. And he gives it to someone very special soon.”

Hermione's heart jumped. If the elf knew that Draco was going to propose soon… The image of Draco laughing with the Bulgarian girl, pressing her up against the side of the bar and his hand squeezing her hip. And Hermione remembered that Katya Viktor was half-blood. And an engagement ring that was meant to be worn on a pure-blood's finger would need to be taken to a curse-breaker…

"She'll be very lucky." Her voice cracked on every word.

"Are you ready, dear?" Narcissa's voice cut through the library. Hermione checked her timepiece and saw that it was 8:43AM. She breathed. Narcissa continued, "We have the library fireplace tied to the Azkaban Floo, so you can pop through right here."

She stuttered a reply and Narcissa produced the Floo Powder. Hermione hitched her bag on her shoulder and joined Narcissa at the fireplace.

"Is there… is there anything I should know? Or…"

"You'll be met by an Auror who will check you in, and walk you through procedures. And you'll meet with him in a private room."

Hermione swallowed. "Alright. And is there anything you'd like me to tell Mr. Malfoy? Or is there anything I should be prepared for?" Hermione felt silly, asking Narcissa for advice on how to speak to her husband.

Narcissa smiled, seeing through her. "He just wants to thank you for helping rehabilitate Draco's life. And to officially meet you."

Hermione bit her tongue, about to comment that they had met. He was either ignoring her at Flourish and Blotts or casting curses her way in the Department of Mysteries, but they'd met.

Hermione grabbed a handful of Floo powder, tossed it in the fireplace, stepped in and said, "Azkaban Visitor Center."

The image of Narcissa smiling at her holding the bag of powder spun away from her and she landed in a stone room. Three chairs lined the far wall, and metal gates to her left separated the room from a dark hallway. It was still cold, even without the Dementors.

An Auror approached the gates from the other side, and began unlocking them with a series of complicated spells. He grinned at her as the gate opened and said, "Hermione Granger?"

"Yes, hello."

"It's excellent to finally meet you in person, Miss Granger." He shook her hand. "Come with me."

He led her to a small room with cabinets. He instructed her to remove all jewelry or metal objects from her person, and place her purse and wand in a cabinet. He ran her over with a spell to reveal hidden objects, like weapons or secondary wands, and then had her sign an agreement regarding the use of wandless magic.

He then passed her off to another guard, who opened a series of more gates, locking them all behind him. The echo of their footsteps on the stones rattled her nerves, and she began looking behind her every six steps, anticipating someone following them.

They arrived at a normal looking stone door, and the guard told her that she would only need to knock to indicate that the meeting was over and she would be immediately let out.

The guard opened the stone door. And Hermione found Lucius Malfoy, hair pulled back, grey Azkaban robes, hands clasped in front of him, and sitting at a two-person table. There was a scrap of paper on the table in front of him.

He looked up at her and his mouth smiled at her while his eyes did not.

“Miss Granger.”

The guard nodded to her and closed the door.

“Mr. Malfoy.”

He gestured to the empty chair across from him. She felt the ghost of where her wand usually pressed against her hip.

She pulled the metal chair out, and the scrape against the stone was obscene. She sat, pushed an escaped lock of hair away from her face, and returned her gaze to him to find him watching her. She blinked at him, but he did not speak.

“It was very kind of you to want to meet with me, Mr. Malfoy. I must confess, I’m still shocked that you would give up your weekend this month with your family.”

“Well,” he said, and his voice was so familiar, but they’d barely spoken in the past. “Narcissa convinced me that it was very important to meet you, Miss Granger. You’ve become so important to her.”

The words were sincere but the intention was not. Again, Hermione had the sinking fear that she would not survive this meeting.

“She’s become very important to me, too.”

“And you’ve been getting on with Draco, I hear.” His voice lilted. It was such an opposite effect than his son’s drawl. It made him sound more interested than he was.

“Yes,” she said, unsure of where to go with this. “We both work at the Ministry now.”

“That’s wonderful.” She could tell it wasn’t. “I can’t thank you enough for speaking at his trial, Miss Granger.”

“Of course, sir. It was the right thing to do.” Her safest response. Her eyes flickered to the small piece of paper resting between his fingers.

“Narcissa wanted me to thank you for that, and to get to know you better,” he said. He sat very tall and still and watched her. “But none of that is why I invited you here today.”

Hermione blinked at him. She swallowed. “Oh?”

He pushed the folded scrap of paper to her. She plucked it from the table, and after a nod from him, she opened it.

Graceful
Exquisite table manners
Skilled in hosting
Witty
Charming
Leader amongst social peers
Beautiful
Fashionable
Level headed
Financially knowledgeable
Obedient
Trained in décor
Practiced dancer
Intelligent
Cool tempered
Pure-blood

Hermione read over the list twice, eyes tripping over the even scrawl. She folded the page again and brought her eyes to meet him, heart beating fast.

“And what is this?”

“A list.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Of qualities in a Malfoy wife.”

Hermione sat very still, waiting for him to speak again. When he did not, she tried, “Would you like for me to pass this along to your wife and son?”

“No, you hold onto that, Miss Granger.” His eyes never left her face.

“Are you… assigning *me* the task of finding a suitable bride for Draco?”

He lifted a brow at her, just as his son did. He stood from the table, and Hermione kept her eyes on him, keeping her breathing even.

“I am unwilling to part with a single item on that list, Miss Granger.” He walked around his chair, and placed his hands on its back. “Except the final one.”

Pure-blood.

Hermione brows came together. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“I receive the paper here in Azkaban, Miss Granger. I know the two of you are romantically involved.”

Her breath left her in a puff. She turned it into a laugh.

“You know what Rita Skeeter tells you.”

“I can see the pictures, Miss Granger. They don’t need Skeeter’s… artistic interpretation.” Hermione tightened her jaw to keep from speaking. “And besides, even if I did not have the proof in the pictures, I have the word of my wife. Who’s grown quite fond of you as more than a friend. As a daughter, she told me.” His eyes sparkled at her.

Oh, Narcissa. What have you done.

“I apologize, Mr. Malfoy.” She looked down at the table to gather her composure before looking back at him. “You have been misinformed. There is nothing romantic going on between your son and me. We’re just…” She stopped.

“’Just friends?’” He smirked at her.

“We’re barely that.”

He raised a brow.

“Yes, Draco has tried throwing me off the trail as well, going on dates with that Bulgarian half-blood every time the two of *you* are pictured together in the paper,” he said. She blinked at him and watched as he scratched his jaw. She filed that comment away. “You’ll come to learn, Miss Granger, once we are…” – he took a breath – “family… that I do not enjoy games.” He began a light stroll around the table, coming around the back of her chair. She recognized it as an intimidation technique. She remained still. “I know that this relationship has been developing for years.”

His voice drifted over her right shoulder, and she listened to him complete his trip around her chair.

“I don’t know what you’re talking—“

“I already *know* about his visits to Narcissa’s mother, Miss Granger.” He said it like it was supposed to mean something to her. “Getting around the inheritance binding spell.” He muttered, “Squandering his future. All for *you*.”

He appeared in her sight again, and leaned against the table, crossing his ankles so casually. He examined her. Hermione’s mind was racing.

“I don’t… I think you’ve misunderstood, Mr. Malfoy.” She cleared her throat and he let her continue. “I don’t know anything about Narcissa’s mother, and if he was asking for money, for ways around the inheritance, I’m sure it was for the business he’s trying to build.”

His eyes immobilized her, in the way his son’s did, but without the flicker of something else.

“This was years ago Miss Granger. And I’m not talking about the business. I’m talking about the Auction.”

Her veins turned to ice. And she felt the blood drain from her face.

“What Auction?” she tried.

Lucius’s lips spread into a smile. It was disturbing.

“I will add ‘Convincing Liar’ to the list of desirable traits for you to work on Miss Granger.”

Her heart ricocheted around her ribcage. She struggled to pull air into her lungs as she watched him step away from the table and begin another arrogant stroll back towards his chair. Hermione was still trying to pull together all of this information when he continued.

“Druella can’t be blamed for tattling, of course. She came to see me shortly after Draco begged her for the money, asking *me* to show him some pity.”

“What money?” She breathed.

“The 35,000 galleons, of course.”

There was a gasp, and it took Hermione a moment to realize it had come from her. She looked at her hands. They were shaking.

“Ah,” he continued. “So, you *do* know the story.” He grinned at her. “I must admit, it took me quite a few weeks to piece together what the money was for. Slave-trading wasn’t really my cup of tea with the Death Eaters.”

This wasn’t right. Hermione balled her hands into fists to keep them from trembling. He told her he would sell her if given the chance. This wasn’t… If he bought her, she would have been his in this dystopian future, no profit made. What would the purpose of that be?

And trust me, Granger. It isn’t your housekeeping skills that they were after.

She looked up at Lucius, and he was watching her from his side of the table. She gathered herself, and tried to see it from his perspective, seeing as her perspective was giving her a headache.

“So, let me understand this correctly.” She set her eyes on him. “You catch your son trying to buy a girl like a common whore, you see a few pictures in the *Prophet* of his ‘lust-filled eyes,’ and you decide it’s time to turn her into ‘wife material.’”

He smiled and looked down at the metal table.

“How unfortunate it is that you are so intelligent, Miss Granger. It keeps you from seeing the truth.” He placed his hands on the table, leaning down to her. “He wasn’t going to *buy* you. He was going to *save* you.”

She breathed.

The eyes looking at her matched Draco's. She focused on them, focused on them while her brain worked. It didn't add up.

Lucius stood to his full height again. "Here is my *proposal*, Miss Granger." His voice slid over the word "proposal," like it was a private joke between the two of them. "You will begin shadowing Narcissa at her social engagements. Learn from her, from her mannerisms, from her expressions. She will put you in contact with Madame Michele, a Charms and Etiquette mistress that teaches all pure-blood girls the important manners. Most girls start at age eight, so you will have a long way to go. You will research the Malfoy family history, becoming familiar with the lineage, the famous ancestry, the Manor itself…"

Hermione let his voice wash over her. He continued. He listed several more manners teachers, dance teachers, interior decorating specialists…. She let him speak. She let him speak so she could think.

Her brain ran through the past ten years, trying to piece in this new information should she chose to accept it. *To save her.* It was incongruous. There was not a single moment in the past ten years of her life where Draco Malfoy would have saved her. And he had made it perfectly clear that Malfoy Manor was no exception to that rule. She'd thought by not identifying them that night, he had cared, or wanted them alive, but he had denied that. Hadn't he?

I didn't give a fig about saving the world, or stopping the Dark Lord – or you and your idiotic friends for that matter!

Her eyes glazed over the table top and Lucius's hands as they moved.

"…who will then bring you to tea with my mother. You will not mention your parentage unless it is brought up..."

She thought back, before the war began. To *buy* her, yes. To humiliate her publicly in front of the Slytherin boys who'd won the war. To pass her around like a whore if that was what suited him. To parade her in front of the remaining members of the Order, proving that the Golden Girl was just as tarnished as the rest.

These were the thoughts that had kept her up since the moment he told her about the Auction six weeks ago. The most valuable slave would not be treated as just a slave or just a concubine.

"…at which point you will begin an account with Madame le Roux who will take measurements..."

She thought back. Was it possible Draco wanted her? There were times now where she could see something in his eyes, something more than teasing, but back then? It's possible he would have bought her to satisfy a curiosity. To hear her virtue being discussed amongst the elder, crueler Death Eaters, or his friends even, and decide that he had tortured her and invested in her over the years – he should be the one to reap the rewards.

These were possible scenarios.

She looked up, and Lucius wasn't done. He walked like his son. Calm and in control of his body.

"… with the ceremony in the garden of the Manor. Reception to follow in the ballroom…"

She thought back. His hand against her hip in Umbridge's office, then shoving her away. His eyes cutting through her at the Yule Ball, as they spun around each other. His voice taunting her, drawling across her ears over the years. The memories that mattered to her, had mattered not at all to him. It was inconsistent. Lucius was bluffing.

Draco would not have sacrificed his inheritance, his future, to save her from becoming another man's slave.

"…You will then—"

"I will not."

He stopped his pacing. He looked down at her. She set her jaw.

"I appreciate the steps you are taking to ensure your lineage and your name are preserved, Mr. Malfoy, even with a Mudblood for a daughter-in-law."

He stood still and cocked his head at her.

"But Draco and I are not engaged. So, I will not abide by your demands."

He smiled at the ground. "'*Draco*,' is it?"

She swallowed. "Yes. Draco. We are friends now. But he was never in love with me and he has no intention of proposing to me. So, you may refrain from embarrassing yourself any further."

Her cheeks reddened as his eyes paled.

"You poor, foolish girl."

"I have no intention of becoming 'Lady Malfoy,' so I will not need your list." She placed it on the table, and stood, turning to the door.

"I do hope you've memorized it, Miss Granger." She closed her eyes in exasperation. "For the majority of his inheritance is still tied up with me. If I hear that he will be engaging in a relationship with someone who does not meet my demands of a Malfoy woman, I may decide to keep the rest of the money tied up until a suitable partner is found."

She turned to him. "You would ruin his business venture just to spite me?"

"Heavens, no, Miss Granger." His voice dripped. "Everything I do, I do for my son."

She stared at him from across the room, palm on the door.

“You have nothing to worry about Mr. Malfoy. You may keep your last item on your list.”

She knocked on the door. The guard opened it immediately and nodded at her.

His voice floated to her. “See to it, Miss Granger.”

The guard locked him in and escorted her down the hall, locking every gate behind them. Her feet clipped against the cold stones. Her fingers locked around her wand as it was given back to her. The same guard as before smiled at her and walked her to the entrance. The stone fireplace loomed at her and he unlocked a cabinet containing the Floo powder.

She thought of her bed. She thought of her shower. She thought of climbing under the covers until everything went away, turning off the lights.

The guard tossed the powder, she climbed in, and he stated “Malfoy Manor” for her before she could process it. The Floo swept her away and she landed in the Malfoy library, facing the model of a perfect Malfoy wife.

She smiled as Hermione arrived. “Hermione, dear.” She sat in her chair, reading a book and sipping her tea.

Hermione stared at the beautiful blonde woman, head pounding.

Graceful. Skilled in hosting.

“How was it?” Narcissa set her tea down on the end table, in the same spot the diamond ring had rested earlier.

The ring that was being taken to a curse-breaker so Draco could marry a Mudblood. She understood now.

A laugh bubbled out from her chest before she could stop it. She wheezed air back in, and felt her head spin, tears pricking her eyes.

Narcissa changed in a second and she stood. “What’s wrong?” And it was so maternal. It was so much like how she wanted her own mother to look at her, that she knew what she had to do.

She had to break up with Narcissa Malfoy.

“Narcissa,” she spoke, and her voice cracked. “Draco and I… we don’t have a relationship.”

Narcissa stood very still, with her hands folded in front of her. Hermione admired how she gave nothing away. She wondered where that fell on Lucius’s list.

“Of course, you do, dear.” Narcissa smiled, lips closed. “You’re old schoolmates, you’ve survived a war, and now you’re becoming friends.”

“Yes, and that’s all there is,” Hermione said, feeling her heart breaking. “I believe I’ve lead you to believe that there is more going on. And for that I’m truly sorry.” She felt her voice

crack again.

Narcissa looked down at the rug, displeased. “What did Lucius say to you?”

“He was actually quite in support of this ‘arrangement’ that you’ve concocted. He found a way to negotiate for what he wants.” Hermione swallowed. “But it’s not what Draco wants.”

“Did Lucius tell you that?” Narcissa said, lips tight.

“He didn’t have to,” Hermione said. “We’re not courting, Narcissa. And something tells me that Draco has no idea about my meeting with Lucius, or about the ring you’re taking in to be altered.”

Narcissa gave her a rueful grin. “It’s only a matter of time, Hermione. I thought it best to be prepared.”

Her pulse jumped, thinking that Narcissa knew something she didn’t. But she killed that dream as quickly as it came to her. Narcissa and Lucius had built something on a foundation of sand. Then she remembered Draco’s inheritance, tied up with Lucius until he saw fit. No, she needed to end this.

“There is nothing to prepare for.”

Narcissa frosted. She bit the inside of her cheek, studying her. Hermione felt so alone here, now.

“I should leave,” she said. “Goodbye, Narcissa. And thank you for everything.” Her lungs were burning as she turned to the library doors. She was losing her grip, eyes blurring.

Her voice called to her as she grasped the door handle. “You do not wish to marry my son?”

And Hermione laughed. She was about to have a full mental break, she could tell. She closed her eyes, and shook her head. How did things get so turned around? She turned to see Narcissa watching her, calculating. And she heard Lucius’s voice.

See to it, Miss Granger.

She knew Narcissa wouldn’t leave it alone. She couldn’t leave it open, her answer ambiguous.

“No, I do not.”

Narcissa remained still. *Cool tempered* and *level headed*. Hermione nodded to her in goodbye, and turned to the doors as the first tears fell.

She flung open the doors, hurrying out, and gasped to find herself facing the bust of Lucius Malfoy, forgetting that it was there. She turned quickly to her left, intending to *sprint* out of this house and almost smacked into Draco, three steps away and hair wet from showering after Quidditch, just as surprised to see her.

He looked between her and the open library doors. He stepped forward, taking in the tears on her cheeks and the erratic way she was sucking in air. “What’s happened?”

She couldn’t stand it any longer. These three people were too much.

“I’m – Draco, I’m so, so sorry for everything. I – I didn’t mean any of this.” She felt new tears pricking her, and hot embarrassment thinking of how Narcissa would explain this to Draco. How Hermione’s stupid actions and uncensored feelings had misled his parents, and almost forced him into an engagement with her. She turned and ran, tearing down the hall, flying past the fireplaces and out into the courtyard.

Draco watched her run. He turned to see his mother, in her library, at the alcohol cabinet.

“Well, Draco,” she whispered, swirling a glass of gin. “Your father’s managed to ruin everything.” She downed it.

Chapter End Notes

Again, see A/N at top. :) Love to all!

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

I'm so honored with all the feedback. Thank you all so much for embracing this story, and I'm excited to give you Draco's perspective after TRTTD is finished.

It was the first Saturday after classes resumed, and Hermione's brain needed a break. The Christmas holidays were relaxing enough, but getting used to the Time-Turner again after that break was taxing. That and the boys were not speaking to her. Again.

Between Scabbers and the Firebolt, neither Ron nor Harry felt very inclined to spend much time with her. That was fine. Telling Professor McGonagall about the Firebolt was the right thing to do.

She'd slept in past breakfast, and finding no one waiting for her in the common room, she headed to the library. There was a fiction book that she read at least once every six months to relax or to stimulate her tired mind. Today would be a wonderful day to get lost in it.

She waved to Madam Pince - who did not wave back - and headed to the fiction stacks, looking for the second shelf from the bottom, left side, twelve stacks back. She scanned the second shelf for the green and gold spine. It was not there. She looked to see if some idiot had replaced it incorrectly, but it was not found anywhere.

She approached Madam Pince and asked if the book had been checked out, and after being hushed, Pince told her that it was not.

Hermione frowned. So, someone was currently reading it ***in*** *the library. She looked about. It was the kind of book that very few people would find entertaining. It had no pictures. Hermione smiled to herself. She had suggested that particular book to several people whenever they tried asking the bookworm for a book recommendation. Not Parvati, not Justin, nor a strange girl named Luna had found the book interesting enough. She had caught*

Penelope Clearwater with the book one Wednesday evening in the library, and after gushing about it, asking Penelope who her favorite character was, did she laugh at this part, etc., Penelope let her know that she in fact "couldn't really get into it" and was returning it just then.

Perhaps the person who had it had grown bored with it and left it off the shelf. She searched the tables and happened upon her favorite table, occupied by Draco Malfoy, reading a book with a green and gold spine.

Hermione sighed. Life wasn't fair.

Her favorite table. Her favorite book. Her least favorite boy.

She took a seat at a neighboring table and glared at him, hoping maybe he would feel her hateful gaze and do the honorable thing. Leave.

She pulled a book off the shelf to look busy and took out her notebook and quill. She watched as Malfoy flipped a page and his eyebrows shot up.

Damn him. He was actually interested in the book. Her book. She strained her neck a bit to figure out what chapter he was on. It looked like he was about a quarter of the way in, and Hermione figured that he would be getting to the part where the prince is transfigured into a dog. The reactions of the rest of the characters were so absurd and the writing was so precise that it was the funniest two pages Hermione had ever remembered reading in her life.

She glared at Malfoy. He wouldn't find it funny. He didn't deserve this book. The main character was a young woman who lived in the Muggle world and was pulled into a different realm. How would he possibly connect?

She huffed. He would put it down soon. He wouldn't laugh as she did, covering her mouth, giggles bubbling from her as the situation worsened. He couldn't—

He smiled. She watched the grin crack his lips apart, showing his teeth. He caught himself and pressed his lips together. Hermione frowned. Perhaps he was laughing at how awful he thought the writing was, making fun of the author in his head.

A puff of air burst from his closed lips, and he pressed his knuckles to his mouth. She could just make out the corner of his lips, pulling upwards. She'd never seen him smile like that. His smiles were always cruel, more of a smirk really.

His eyes were bright with joy, and Hermione read the book through him. The prince had just been transfigured into a dog, and the Queen laughed, commenting on how much more handsome he now looked. One of the trolls said he smelled nicer too, and then the dog took off, running through the castle, barreling through the feast, confusing the guests, and then the wizard said Hermione's favorite line in the book –

Draco chuckled. He immediately looked up, embarrassed, and turned to find her watching him. She looked down before he could snarl at her. It was so much nicer to see him smile and laugh. She didn't want to ruin it.

She heard him shuffle a bit, close the book, and she peeked as he stood and left the table, taking the book with him. She watched as he checked it out with Madam Pince and left the library.

She stared after him, wondering what she would do now.

~*~

Hermione ran from Malfoy Manor like someone was chasing her. She flew through the iron gates that she recognized from "that night," stopping only to test if she was clear to Apparate. When she could not, she ran again toward the top of a hill. Once she tried from there, she popped away.

She reappeared in her living room. She panted, sucking air in and forcing it out. She dropped her bag and put away her wand. She paced the room, trying to catch her breath.

He wasn't going to buy *you. He was going to* save *you.*

She pressed her eyes closed. She felt the cold of Azkaban on her skin, Lucius's eyes itching at her pores.

It's only a matter of time, Hermione.

Narcissa's warm arms and her friendly gaze. Was it all a game? A plan?

She darted to the bathroom and flipped on the shower. She stripped, still panting, and jumped in before the water had heated.

She scrubbed at her skin under the cold water, shivering. The water ran down her face, mixing with tears starting to drip from her eyes.

So, tell me, Granger. I've been curious. Had events played out differently last spring, could I be 35,000 galleons richer?

She turned off the water and grabbed for her robe, wrapping it around herself. She headed to her bedroom, and collapsed on the bed, wet hair dampening her pillows.

One of them was lying. Draco told her he would sell her. Lucius said Draco planned to save her. Draco hissed at her that she was worth 35,000 to him, while Lucius plainly stated that Draco went to Narcissa's mother requesting 35,000 as a backup plan.

She blinked at her bedroom ceiling. This line of thinking was unnecessary. The Auction did not take place. The 35,000 galleons were hypothetical, regardless of who was paying it. What bothered her now was Narcissa informing Lucius that she and Draco were soon to be engaged.

The tears returned to her eyes. She took a shaky breath. How embarrassing. Every single person knew that she loved him, and every single person wanted them together. Ginny knew. Harry knew. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy knew. They had their own fan club, rooting for them, lead by Rita Skeeter and Morty –

Morty!

Hermione sat up, gasping. She checked her clock. 10:10AM. She cursed and jumped from bed as a pecking at her window caught her attention. She opened the glass and a small little owl flew in. Hermione grabbed up the note and found Morty's handwriting.

Miss Granger,

I hope you are well. Don't worry about coming in today if your appointment has delayed you. I will take care of the shop in your absence.

Please let me know if you are healthy so I can stop worrying. And don't fret.

Morty

Hermione screamed, crumpling the note. She could not remember the last time she'd been so distressed that she'd missed work, or an assignment, or class. She'd survived a *war* and still managed to maintain her grades. She was heaving for air again, pressing her palms against her eyes.

Hermione couldn't breathe. She was the most intelligent person she knew. The Brightest Witch of Our Age. And she would always be two steps behind the Malfoys.

She sucked in a slow breath, pulling her hands away from her red eyes. She focused her gaze on her wall, healing her mind, releasing her breath.

She was Hermione Fucking Granger. And she would get answers.

She wandlessly flipped on all the lights in her room. She grabbed a quill and wrote Morty back, saying she was very sorry, but the appointment did not go well at all and she would not be in today or tomorrow. She was perfectly healthy, but needed a day or so. She attached the note to the bird, and when it looked at her, begging for a treat, she glared at it, magic crackling. The bird took off.

She summoned her wand from her pile of clothes in the bathroom. It flew to her and she waved it at the wall facing her bed, removing pictures and mirrors. She pointed it at the chest next to her bed, and up flew all the newspaper clippings Ginny had cut for her, and those she had secretly saved herself.

Starting from the left, at the spot next to her door, Hermione pasted the article announcing Draco's trial date that had come out while she was at Hogwarts for her 8th year. Then Skeeter's "DRACO MALFOY: A FREED MAN" article, she stamped just to the right. She continued until she had a timeline.

As her eyes ran over the articles and pictures, Lucius's face glared at her from the article printed on her birthday. Draco had visited Lucius at Azkaban on September 18, and had walked away upset, according to the picture. He'd asked Lucius about releasing the inheritance, and Lucius had provided "a small amount" according to Draco. The rest would be released on January 1, "contingent on a few things."

Hermione wondered what kind of ultimatum Lucius had given him that day, and if it was anything like the ultimatums she'd received that morning.

She gnawed on her thumbnail as she read through the rest of the article – a habit she'd gotten rid of years ago. Draco had gone on a date with a French girl that night. Something teased at her memory.

Going on dates with that Bulgarian half-blood every time the two of you *are pictured together in the paper.*

What an assumption, Lucius. She scanned over every picture of Katya Viktor, finding "DRACO MALFOY FINDS LOVE." Their first date was just before he started work at the Ministry, before she and Draco were ever pictured together.

She found the second date with Katya. The article was actually published the day of Antonin Dolohov's trial. The day Draco told her about the Auction. He'd taken Katya to lunch the day before, only a handful of days after Draco visited his father in Azkaban. Her eyes scanned and found the first time Draco kissed her in the papers. It was a week after Narcissa, Draco, and she had sat down at Fortescue's. The most recent date was just last night. She ran her eyes backwards over the timeline and found the last article published about Draco featured the brawl with Ron, and their heated conversation in front of the cabins.

She filed this away. It wasn't much of a pattern, but Lucius still seemed to think that it meant something. He said nothing in that meeting today that wasn't meant to be heard, to be analyzed.

She stared at the article about the brawl from last week. She had questions. She took a quill and wrote notes directly on the wall, drawing arrows, circling words. Her eyes landed on the pictures from Fortescue's. He'd told her not to return home.

Tomorrow, she'd start there.

~*~

Several hours later there was a *crackle* and a *whoosh* from the living room. Harry. She'd owled him about twenty minutes ago asking him to pop in after dinner.

"Hermione?"

"Back here!"

Harry entered her bedroom cautiously, and from the way he looked at her, she could tell it was a disaster.

She sat on the floor in front of her bed, a carton of Chinese food she'd ordered earlier on her lap, chopsticks still clicking together in her fingers. She was still wearing her bathrobe, and her hair had dried naturally, which meant it was a tragedy. His eyes took her in, and then cast on the wall.

The Malfoy Wall, she'd named it.

His eyes were wide but cautious as they came back to her.

"What's happened?"

"Not a lot, and yet everything all at once," she replied.

"Did you go to work?"

"I took the day off to figure out a few things." She kept her eyes on the wall, not wanting to see his face now.

"What things?"

"I'm trying to spot a liar. And I need you to fill in a few gaps for me." She clicked her chopsticks together.

"…Alright –"

"What do you remember about that night at Malfoy Manor?"

He was quiet, and she looked up at him. His eyebrows had jumped and he turned to look at the Malfoy Wall. She'd expanded it quite a bit, adding in notes and questions to the printed articles, but then also continuing the timeline in reverse, working backwards from the first article and writing on the back of the door. Harry was seeing this now, she realized.

"I… I mean, I think I remember quite a lot. What is it that you don't remember?"

She jumped up, taking her chopsticks with her. "Do you remember anyone mentioning anything about an Auction? Or a monetary exchange for prisoners?" She turned to him. "Anything Wormtail or Greyback might have mentioned?"

"An Auction? No, nothing like that. The Snatchers were looking to turn us in for money, I think, but…" He faced her again. "Do you mind if I take your temperature?"

"Yes, I do mind." She walked to the wall and, with her chopsticks, stabbed the picture of Ron and Draco fighting. "Do you know why this fight started?"

He stepped closer to her, a timid smile on his face. "…Because it was someone's bright idea to let Ron and Malfoy on a Quidditch pitch together? Can I get you some water?"

"Ron said that Draco baited him. That if I'd heard what Draco said, I would have punched him, too. Did you hear it?"

Harry took a breath and looked away, which meant he was about to lie. "Er… not really, no."

"Harry Potter, does it look like I'm playing games today?"

Harry took her in. Pink bathrobe, one sock on, hair rising away from her head, dark circles, and still clicking a pair of chopsticks at him.

He sighed and looked away from her. "Well, I guess Ron accused Draco of showing off for you, or trying to score just to humiliate Ron. So, Ron told him to stay away from you, and… they started fighting." Harry looked at the picture, watching as the image of himself came into frame to pull Draco off of Ron.

"And you don't remember what Draco said to him?" she said.

Harry paused. "No."

"Would you prefer to give me your memory of the event? I have a Pensieve here."

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's a little crass, is all."

"Harry, I promise you, it won't even make the list of top ten most shocking things I've heard today."

Harry scratched his jaw, and stepped up to the pictures of the fight. "Well, Ron told him to stay away from you. He said something, like, 'you should find a new bookstore to patronize,' and 'stay away from Hermione.'" The moving picture on the wall repeated itself, starting from the top of the fight. Harry continued, "And then Draco said, 'Why? You've stayed away from her enough for the two of us.'"

She watched Draco's lips move in the picture, standing still and calm. Like his father.

Harry said, "And then Ron shoved him, I think – yes, right there." He pointed at the picture as Ron shoved Draco. "And Draco said…" Harry trailed off, and the picture continued. Draco's lips moved and then Ron punched him in the face.

"Harry?"

Harry looked down. "Well, I heard him say, something like, 'Ireland's a long way away. I was just keeping her warm for you.'"

Harry shuffled his shoes, blushing. Hermione watched as Draco regained his footing from the punch and snarled as he took Ron to the ground, attacking him.

Hermione laughed. Harry looked up at her while she giggled. "Oh, Merlin. Boys…" She shook her head pressed a thumb to her temple. Harry stood in silence while she watched the whole scene play out again, now knowing the dialogue.

To buy her.

She bit her nail. Watching as Draco treated her sexuality, and coincidently her virginity, like a commodity. It could have been to *buy* her.

Harry ran into frame, pulling Draco off of Ron, and Ron sucker punched him. Hermione winced. Or this Quidditch squabble could have no meaning. Just Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy finding another reason to hit each other in the face.

"Hermione," Harry said, and she looked at him. "I'll stay and answer more questions, but I'm going to get you some tea, alright?"

"Fine," she said, waving him away.

She heard him pad out of the room and start rummaging in the kitchen for the kettle. She grabbed up her quill and wrote on the wall, *Ireland's a long way away. I was just keeping her warm for you.*

She stepped back and looked at the Wall again. She considered making a graph of To Sell, To Buy, To Save, and marking little ticks under each every time an event or memory supported one. She looked for space on the wall and found she'd run out. She took another step back, taking in her room. This was lunacy.

She felt a headache coming on, and tears prick her eyes. How ridiculous was this? And she'd let *Harry* see her craze?

She heard a *crackle* and *whoosh* from the front room. Had Harry left? Had he abandoned her?

Voices from the front room, and then footsteps. Ginny opened her door slowly, pajamas, slippers and sleeping mask around her forehead. She looked around the room and Hermione blushed.

"The fuck is this?"

"I… I don't know. I think I've lost it." Hermione started sucking in air, about to break.

Harry poked his head around the door. "I didn't know what to do. She's been like this all day it seems," he whispered to Ginny.

"I got it, Potter," Ginny said, taking the tea from his hands.

"You're supposed to be in Istanbul. You have a game tomorrow morning." Hermione tried to pull her hair away from her face and off her neck, getting it into control somehow.

Ginny ignored her and turned her attention to the Wall. Hermione felt the heat creep up her neck as Ginny examined her madness and Harry stood like a guard at the door. Ginny turned to her.

"What did he do?"

Hermione shook her head. "It wasn't Draco. It was Lucius." She heard Harry shift in the doorway. Ginny's eyebrows shot up. "But it wasn't Lucius only. It's all three of them." Hermione sighed and sat on the foot of her bed, facing the Wall.

"How is Lucius involved?" Ginny asked, after she was sure Hermione wasn't going to elaborate.

"I went to see him in Azkaban today." Hermione closed her eyes when there was silence in the room, not wanting to see her friends' reactions to her gullibility. "Narcissa set it up. She

said he just wanted to thank me for speaking at Draco's trial, but instead he was drawing up the marriage contracts."

She looked up and Ginny was staring at her with wide, greedy eyes. Harry's brows were drawn together.

"Well," Harry said, "That escalated quickly."

She told them about the list, about Narcissa and the ring. She told them about Lucius's insistence that there was a romantic relationship between Draco and her. And when she got to the Auction, she stuttered, and looked over to Harry. Ginny sent him out of the room, much to his confusion.

"And so, you decided to make a serial killer wall?" Ginny questioned after Hermione had told her the rest. Ginny sat next to her on the bed.

"I just… I'm so tired of being confused and not understanding. I'm trying to understand."

Ginny nodded, looking over the Wall. She turned to her. "Do you remember what was on his 'list?'" She smirked.

Hermione looked at the Wall. She'd purposefully avoided writing the list on the Wall, as she had no intention of abiding by it. But, of course, that meant that she had it running through her head for several hours now.

"Graceful, table manners, good at hosting, witty, charming, social leader, beautiful, fashionable, level headed, financially knowledgeable, obedient, trained in décor, practiced dancer, intelligent, cool tempered… and pure-blood."

Ginny laughed. "Come on, Granger. What's difficult about those? Several of them come to you naturally, like 'obedient' and 'cool tempered.'"

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you're here Gin, but I wish you hadn't come. It's late in Turkey now."

Ginny waved her off and said, "Well, from the way I see it, Granger, you have two choices." Ginny stood and pointed at the Wall. "You can take that thing down, get some sleep, and tomorrow, choose to move forward from the Malfoys. Choose to ignore Draco Malfoy and treat him like a co-worker at best. Not your ex-fiancé."

Hermione grimaced, and Ginny continued. "Or, leave it up, sleep in my room so you can rest, and when I'm back on Monday we'll start going through this together, while you ignore Draco Malfoy and treat him like a co-worker and not your ex-fiancé."

Hermione rolled her eyes. And Ginny said, "I'd prefer you choose option one, but I think it's option two. But, either way, you're not to begin looking into any of this alone. Do you hear me, Granger?"

Hermione nodded.

~*~

Twelve hours later, Hermione stood on the sidewalk in front of her childhood home, alone.

She could feel the magic humming from just two paces away from the front yard, and knew Malfoy had not been playing with her. Something happened here.

She looked up and down the street, now regretting that she'd come during daylight. She knew none of her neighbors would recognize her anymore, that's why she hadn't erased their memories as well. She'd been gone for so long.

She stepped onto the drive, and felt a buzz course through her. Someone had cast a Muggle-Repelling Charm on the house. And it hadn't been her. That would explain why the house had not been sold or touched.

Moving to the front door, she shielded her wand from view, and muttered, "*Specialis Revelio*." Nothing. There were no hexes or charms waiting for her inside. She took a breath and opened the door.

It was exactly as she expected. Nothing. The end table beside the door where her mother would drop her keys and her father would forget his umbrella was gone. There was a faint outline on the wall where the picture of the three of them in London used to hang.

She closed the door behind her and tried, "*Homenum Revelio*." Nothing. She closed her eyes. There was no hum of magic.

Hermione stepped forward, poking her head around the entrance to the front room. All furniture removed, and the outline of pictures on the wall. She continued on into the kitchen, and found it bare, several drawers left open and the steady drip of the faucet her father could never tighten. She took the route from the kitchen into the living area, and turning the corner, that was when she found it.

Splashed across the wall above the fireplace where the pictures and greeting cards used to sit, where her mother and she would hang garland at Christmas, were glistening red letters, dripping.

Mudblood,

You can run, but they can't hide.

She shivered. She turned around herself quickly, making sure there was no one lurking behind her. And her eyes landed back on the words, clearly written in blood, the "y" in "they" had dripped down past the scrawl and had just reached the bricks of the fireplace before it dried.

She just received a letter from Monica Wilkins last week. It had said that the two of them were fine and just getting over a cold. They were going snorkeling next week for their anniversary. She knew in her brain that her mother and father had survived, but her heart needed reassurance.

She needed to know whose blood was winding down her walls.

She raised her wand and said, "*Dominus Sanguinem.*" The letters shook and peeled off the wall. They twisted around each other in a little red tornado, heading toward her wand. They spun as they formed a red silhouette, shaping into three-dimensions.

It was a man, and Hermione's heart leapt as she waited for her father's thin jaw line to appear or his thin eyebrows.

The features morphed into a pointed face, with a firm jaw and eyes she knew were grey, and she watched as Draco Malfoy's blood swirled into a visage of himself.

He had been here. And he had splashed blood on her living room walls.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

I got a lot of feedback on confusion with the flashback, so I have gone back in and italicized and will continue to italicize. Before you ask, no, we will not be starting every chapter with a flashback now. Just peppering them in.

Again, thank you to everyone who is reading, commenting, and Kudo-ing. I'm just so overwhelmed by you all.

*He had the book at the Slytherin dining table. Around **food.** How despicable.*

He'd had the book for almost a week now, and Hermione laughed at how slow his comprehension must be if he was still trying to finish it. She'd found him reading it during History of Magic on Monday, in the library again on Tuesday, and now Wednesday at breakfast.

She stabbed her eggs with her fork and glared. What if he spilled pumpkin juice on it! She would absolutely tattle on him then.

She watched as he turned a page and realized he wasn't at the end. He was at the beginning. He was re-reading it?? Ugh!

Why would anyone--?

*She stopped that thought, as she was sure **she** had read that same book twice in one week two years ago.*

"Hermione, do you know where Harry's at?"

She looked up and Seamus was calling for her, a few seats down.

“No, we’re not talking.”

“Oh… alright.”

*She returned her attention to Malfoy and **her** book. She could really use that book this week. It had been several weeks now that Harry and Ron had stopped talking to her. Lavender and Parvati had started talking about boys in the dormitories at night, so she either had to silence her curtains to avoid them, or spend more time out. The book would have been the perfect distraction this week. She’d been down to visit Hagrid several times, but there was only so much rock cake one could pretend to eat.*

He turned another page and it must have been an amusing part, because Malfoy would bring his fingers to his mouth whenever he tried not to smile. She’d noticed this yesterday. She watched as Pansy Parkinson scooted closer to Malfoy. If she dare put her grubby hand on her book…

Pansy leaned over him, trying to see what he was reading. He shoved her off. Hermione smiled as Pansy pouted. Malfoy stood from the table, rolling his eyes at her and packed up his things to leave – taking the book.

Hermione scowled. She rose from the Gryffindor table and followed him out. She exited the Great Hall and turned left, finding the hallway empty.

“Why are you watching me, Granger?”

She turned and found Draco Malfoy, one arm clutching her book and one arm pointing his wand at her.

“Are you done with that book?”

He blinked at her. He looked at the green and gold book that he was holding.

“What?”

“You really shouldn’t read books that aren’t even yours at the dining table. If you spilled even the smallest drop of coffee on the pages, Madam Pince wouldn’t let you hear the end of it. Trust me,” she grumbled.

“Well, it’s a good thing I don’t drink coffee.” He glared at her and turned to walk away.

“Are you done with it or not?”

“What’s it to you, Mudblood?” He called over his shoulder, and continued away.

“You’re only allowed to check a book out for a maximum of two weeks!”

“Then you can get it in two weeks!” He yelled at her, turning around. “Unless I check it back out again!” He smirked at her and she huffed, turning on her heel to return to the Great Hall.

Merlin, she hated him!

~*~

"DRACO MALFOY: ENTREPRENEUR"
by Rita Skeeter

You know the name. You know the face. You know the hair! What you don't know about Draco Malfoy is what he plans to do next.

But I do!

Draco Malfoy, son of Death Eater Lucius Malfoy and socialite Narcissa Malfoy, was pardoned by the Wizengamot just eight weeks ago and has been working for the Ministry on probation since. But once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin, and his ambitious spirit could not be satisfied at the Ministry.

"I've had a dream of owning my own business. It's not something new, it's something that kept me sane in Azkaban, and it's motivating me forward."

Draco Malfoy sat down with yours truly for an exclusive interview about this new business venture and what it means to him. Continues on page 7!

~*~

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when she flipped open the paper Monday morning. She was tense all day Sunday – even before visiting her childhood home – thinking that someone had photographed her leaving Azkaban the day before. When no pictures or stories could be found in the Sunday paper, she knew there was only one more day that she needed to stay off the radar so Draco could announce. Opening the paper and finding Draco's face smirking back at her with Skeeter's title, she knew she was in the clear.

Skeeter continued on page seven, detailing the consulting firm and listing the services Malfoy Consulting Group would offer. Draco was very candid with her, opening up about how important it was to him to separate himself from his father's reputation. She also surprised him in the interview with the news that he had been chosen for the cover of the December issue of Witch Weekly, winning the Most Charming Smile award. Skeeter described his gracious acceptance.

Good. Good for him. This was how it was supposed to be. She may not understand why he was at her house, why his blood was on her walls, but she did know that she'd practically made a deal with Lucius Malfoy that she wouldn't get in the way of Draco's business moving forward. An article in the paper regarding Draco's unlimited potential and future that did not mention her name once was good news.

She sighed. Ginny would be home tonight and she would have to tell her that she went to her home yesterday, alone.

The image of the red lettering ran through her mind, and Hermione shook her head to clear it. Sometime during the war, Draco Malfoy's blood was put on her living room walls. His pure

blood. She frowned. She couldn't imagine him spilling his beloved blood for any reason. But the phrasing sounded like him. Like Draco Malfoy at Hogwarts.

She tossed the paper in the rubbish bin and headed out to work abominably early. Taking two days off of Cornerstone had really upset her schedule, and she was itching for the consistency of work.

She wove her way through the already bustling Atrium, took the lifts to the fourth floor, and happily strolled through an empty Magical Creatures office. Once she arrived at her desk, she found a reminder from herself. She had a Wizengamot hearing today. Oh, wonderful.

Johnathan Jugson was appealing his life-sentencing today, claiming that he had been placed under the Imperius curse, forcing him to participate in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries.

Nice try, Jugson. Hermione smiled.

When she heard Mathilda's shoes clicking towards her corner office ten minutes later, Hermione took a breath and met her there.

"Mathilda," she said from the doorway.

"Granger! Good morning!" Mathilda's blouse was one button off, and her hair was sticking out at odd angles. Hermione would almost think she'd just come from a tryst if she didn't already know that this was Mathilda's daily look. Mathilda plopped the files in her arms down on the desk. "You're in early."

"Yes, I wanted to remind you that I have a Wizengamot hearing at ten."

"That's fine. That's fine." Mathilda shook off her coat and tossed it toward the chair in the corner, missing it.

"And I'd love a word, once you're settled in."

"Yes, yes." Mathilda sat in her chair. "I'm settled! Anything wrong?"

"No, not at all," Hermione said, taking the chair across from her. "I heard that Rosenberg is retiring."

"Yes! So exciting for Rochelle! She has seven grandchildren, you know?" Mathilda reached for a quill and knocked the ink pot over.

"I didn't know, actually." She watched as the woman across from her vanished the spilled ink and dipped her quill in, writing *HG 11-8-99* across the top of a scroll. "I wanted to let you know that I plan to apply."

Mathilda looked up at her. "Really?"

"Yes," she said. "You know that I am very passionate about house-elf rights, and I hope you would consider me once the job has been posted."

Mathilda chewed on her lip and sat back in her chair. “It would be a lateral move for you.”

“Yes, but a move in the right direction, still.”

Mathilda nodded and sat forward, jotting notes on her scroll. Hermione wondered if that was all?

“Rochelle has been at that desk for forty years. Did you know that?” Mathilda crossed a “t” and looked up at her again.

“I didn’t.”

“She is very like you. Passionate about the house-elves. She turned down every offer at a higher-ranking position over those forty years, because she couldn’t tear herself away from them. She was very comfortable.” Mathilda clasped her hands in front of her. “I’d hate for you to get comfortable, Hermione.”

Hermione blinked at her. “I… I understand. I plan to continue upward as the positions open.”

“But only in House-Elf Relocation?”

“I… Well,” Hermione swallowed. “I guess my short-term goal has always been Relocation, yes. But—“

“What is your long-term goal, Hermione?”

Hermione opened her mouth. And closed it. Mathilda continued.

“Did you know that Millicent Bagnold worked in five of the Ministry’s seven departments before being elected Minister? Scrimgeour started in Transport and then worked his way up the D.M.L.E. before heading the Auror office. Leonard Spencer-Moon worked as a tea-boy in Magical Accidents and Catastrophies before moving up to the Muggle Liaison Office and then over to D.M.L.E. for Misuse of Muggle Artefacts.”

Mathilda smiled at her. These were all Ministers. *Minister*.

“It is wise, Miss Granger,” Mathilda whispered, “to consider other departments as you move upwards. It will only help you in the end.”

In the end. What was Hermione Granger’s end?

“That is definitely something to think about Mathilda. Thank you.”

“I wanted to let you know,” Mathilda stood and began opening shelves, pulling files, “that Robards is quite impressed with you.”

“Gawain Robards?”

“Yes,” she said, dropping more files onto her desk. “Draco Malfoy will be leaving in December – excellent article in the paper today, by the way. Did you get a chance to read it?”

“Er, yes –“

“Well, Robards is looking to make Malfoy’s position a full-time senior analyst position.” She smiled at her. “He is hoping you will apply.”

Senior analyst? That wasn’t climbing the ladder. That was chopping off the first few rungs.

“Well, it’s definitely something to think about,” Hermione said, head spinning.

She thanked Mathilda for her time, and returned to her desk, thinking about the position. She’d get to work with Harry more often. And Katie Bell. But it would have nothing to do with house-elves or magical creatures. She’d just had her first success in current position with the Chimaera project.

She was still frowning, weighing the pros and cons at ten minutes until ten when she called the lift to head down to the courtrooms.

The lift arrived, gates opened and Draco Malfoy was leaning against the wall. Her blood ran cold. She’d forgotten all about him for three hours. How lovely was that.

His eyes held the same surprise and suspicion from the last time she’d seen him – at Malfoy Manor, as she was running. She set her jaw and joined him in the lift. As the gates closed, she could feel him, watching her.

What did he know about her meeting with Lucius? Did he know of Narcissa’s plan? Or was he completely oblivious? What did Narcissa tell him after she fled? Did she tell him that Hermione had rejected him? And did that even matter?

Not her ex-fiancé. Her co-worker.

“Good morning,” she said. It was overdue. There had been too much silence before she’d greeted him.

The lift slowed to stop at Level 5. She didn’t know whether to curse since the ride would take forever if it stopped at every floor, or sigh if that meant there would be others joining them.

When the gates opened and revealed Aiden O’Connor midway through biting into an apple, Hermione decided it was her lucky day.

“Hey!” Aiden mumbled around his apple. “Malfoy, great article today. That’s exciting, isn’t it?”

“Thank you, yes.” His voice was strained. Aiden continued talking, his strongest trait.

When the lift slowed again for the Atrium, and Aiden was still talking, Hermione almost grinned. Almost over.

Aiden stepped out, and looked over his shoulder. “Getting out here?”

“No, I’m heading down to the Wizengamot,” Draco said. Shit shit shit.

“Er, same.” She said.

Aiden waved, and bit into his apple again as the gates closed and they descended.

She heard Draco take a breath to speak, and she cut him off.

“It was an excellent article, really,” she said. “Skeeter did a wonderful job introducing Malfoy Consulting Group to the Wizarding World.”

She didn’t look at him.

“Thank you.”

“And congratulations on Witch Weekly.” She chuckled.

The lift arrived at Level 10. He held the gate open for her. She kept her gaze straight ahead, on the oak door at the end of the hall. Their shoes echoed against the stones, and she wondered if he was early or late for his appointment with the Wizengamot. Because she was five minutes early.

Please, don’t let them stand here for five minutes, waiting for her name to be called.

He was watching her again. They stopped about three quarters of the way down the hall, roughly in the same spot they’d been the last time they’d shared the hallway.

The last time, she regretted standing across from him, forced to face him and look at him or look at the ground. He stopped and leaned against the wall to the right. She decided to join him on his wall this time, a few feet down.

This was so much worse.

She couldn’t see him. She could feel him, feel him watching her.

The last time they’d shared this hallway he’d accused her of trying to free all of the Death Eaters, accused her of creating a Life Debt for testifying for him in Azkaban, pressed her up against this very wall and let hot air hiss from his lips about Auctions and galleons and virginities.

“You weren’t at Cornerstone yesterday.”

She felt her breath catch in her lungs. His eyes were on her, so she did not move and focused on breathing.

“No, I was ill.” She stared at the opposite wall, keeping her head high. “Was Morty able to help you?”

He was silent. And she was sure if she looked at him, he would be scowling at her.

So he’d come to Cornerstone the day after she’d fled from his house, refusing to marry him. A voice in her head chuckled at the bare bones of the situation. What had he wanted from

her? Another book giftwrapped for another girlfriend?

From the corner of her eye she could see him turn his body toward her, crossing one ankle over the other.

Or maybe to apologize? Or to clarify? Or to confuse her further. Probably the last.

“I heard you went to see my father.”

She closed her eyes. Co-worker. Co-worker. Co-worker.

“I did,” she said. “It was very nice of him to want to meet with me.”

She was about to elaborate. To lie, or to ghost over the truth, or to stick to the forty-five seconds of pleasant conversation Lucius and she had had, but she remembered the blood on her walls. She didn’t really owe him anything. She heard Draco’s knuckle pop to her right. And the silhouette of him pushing his hair back.

He was agitated. Oh, how delicious.

She kept her eyes straight ahead and said nothing more. He pressed a hand against the wall, uncrossing his ankles.

“And you had a nice visit?”

“Perfectly nice.” She thought about examining her nails in his presence, but thought that might be too callous. “I’d never truly met him.” She turned to look at him, and with a falsely pleasant look in her eye, said, “You’re very similar.”

His left eye twitched, and she thought of the paper in her wastebasket at home, adamantly stating how much Draco wanted to distance himself from his father.

The corner of her mouth pulled up even as she tried to stop it. He saw, and clenched his jaw. He stepped forward.

“If I’d known about the meeting, I would have stopped it.”

She held his eyes. He was three paces from her, but she could feel the air tightening in the hallway, just like last time.

“My mother likes to meddle in things she has no business in. I apologize that you got wrapped up in it.”

An apology? For what? For the unwarranted proposal? For the stress of sitting down with Lucius Malfoy in the first place? For the entire false relationship with Narcissa Malfoy? There were still no answers from him.

“I don’t know what he said to you, but—“

“Why is your blood on my living room walls?”

His mouth had stopped mid-word, and he blinked at her, eyes dancing back and forth between hers. She pinned him with her stare, not giving in. She watched as his jaw clicked shut, and he swallowed.

“Miss Granger?” The portly man poked his head out the door. “Are you ready?”

“Quite.” She stepped off the wall and clicked her way toward the oak door, leaving Draco behind.

~*~

“Tell me again what it said.”

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead. She sat at the dining table while Ginny paced the living room, wringing her hands. Harry was cooking dinner in the kitchen, occasionally piping in. She’d forgotten how exhausting “team-research” was. She had to continue to re-tell and re-explain bits and pieces that came so easily to the front of her mind.

“*Mudblood, You can run, but **they** can’t hide.*”

“And how big were the letters?” Ginny changed her pacing path and twisted around the coffee table.

Hermione spread her hands apart, indicating the size. Harry popped his head out of the kitchen to look.

“That’s too much blood,” Harry said.

“You’re telling me!” Hermione laughed.

“No, I mean…” Harry stepped out of the kitchen, sauce spoon in hand. “*Draco Malfoy* cut open his precious skin, split his precious vein, and lost that much of his precious blood? For what? Just to scare you?”

Ginny was nodding and pacing, looking at the floor. It was odd having her here in Ron’s place. Usually Ron just sat still, eating, until Hermione figured it out all alone.

“And that was all?” Ginny said.

“I searched the rest of the house and couldn’t find any other messages. There were no curses. Just the Muggle-Repelling Charm.”

“I need to look at the Wall.” Ginny scratched her head and changed her pace to a direct path to Hermione’s room.

Harry disappeared back into the kitchen. Hermione picked up her coffee cup, about to take a sip when Harry reappeared, frowning at the floor, arms crossed.

“Ginny might have been out of town, but I was here.” He looked up at her. “You shouldn’t have gone alone. We’re still a team.”

Hermione blinked. “I… I’m sorry. I just…” She looked down. He was disappointed. “I wanted to return home by myself.”

Harry nodded, and said, “I allowed you to come with me when I returned home.”

He stepped back into the kitchen, and she heard a pot bubbling. She stared at the spot he disappeared, thinking of Godric’s Hollow, until she heard Ginny’s pattering feet lead her back out into the living area.

“Muggle-Repelling Charm. Why?” Ginny resumed her pace.

Hermione shook off the guilt and turned to the ginger. “I… I don’t know.”

“And you didn’t place one when you left?”

“No, I assumed the house would sell,” she said, picking up her cup again. “It’s possible that the charms I placed on my parents caused them to pack up and leave without thinking of placing the house on the market. I made it clear that they needed to move to Australia within the week.”

Harry appeared from the kitchen, levitating three plates of pasta and vegetables. He set them on the table. “Perhaps we could stop talking about the… blood on the wall.” Harry nodded to Ginny, who was pacing, cracking her neck.

Hermione’s mind brought forward the image of the blood outside Moaning Myrtle’s Bathroom. *The Chamber of Secrets has been opened*. The bloody letters Ginny had written while possessed. Hermione had forgotten and had dragged her through this again.

“I’m not a flower, Potter.” Ginny scowled at him and sat at the table. “I want to figure this out just as much as she does, so let me help.”

“No, Harry’s right. We can let it rest for a bit.” Hermione grabbed up her napkin and started eating. There was silence.

“What did he say when you asked him?”

She looked up. Ginny wasn’t eating. She was scowling at the table.

“Nothing. I mean, it wasn’t really a question. It was more of a… punctuation.” She smiled. “I didn’t expect an answer.”

“Do you think he’d tell the truth if you really asked him?” Harry said.

“No,” Ginny and Hermione said at the same time.

Ginny stood and paced again. Harry sighed.

“He said he didn’t know about your meeting with Lucius?” Ginny said.

“No. He said he would have stopped it if he had.”

Ginny rubbed her forehead. “This is maddening!”

Hermione laughed. “Believe me, I know. But let it go, Ginny. Eat.”

“I want to know what’s going on in that stupid blond head!” Ginny stomped. Hermione smiled.

“It’s a shame we don’t have any contacts on the Wizengamot.” Harry brought his fork to his mouth, twirling pasta.

Ginny and Hermione looked at him. “Why?”

“Well, the Wizengamot got to review the memories he provided. Those might have had some answers.” Harry chewed, looking down at his plate.

“Memories?” Hermione said.

“Yeah,” Harry said with a full mouth. “He provided memories the day he was released. The testimonies and the memories were the sole reasons he got off. Memories either proving his innocence or condemning other Death Eaters.” He looked up at them. “I told you that.”

“No,” Ginny said. “I don’t think you did.”

“Oh.” Harry shrugged. "Well, good. I shouldn't have. Shouldn't *be*!"

“And where are these memories now?”

Harry spun another bite of pasta onto his fork. “Probably in the Wizengamot Administration Services office, filed for review.”

Ginny looked at Hermione. She raised a brow. Hermione could feel her heart beating and she didn’t know why.

“And,” Ginny said slowly, “What security measures are in place in the Wizengamot Admin office? Curses? Passwords?”

“Rotating passwords and a two-Auror shift.” Harry wiped his mouth. He grabbed for his water glass.

“And,” Ginny said, “When is your shift?”

Harry looked at the two girls over his water glass. His eyes wide, then weary.

He set the glass down, scowling at the table. “Oh, bollocks.”

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for all the feedback!

It would be another three weeks before Harry's shift guarding the filing room of the Wizengamot Administration Services office. He refused to switch shifts, as it would arouse too much suspicion. And Harry made it very clear that *suspicion* would not be tolerated.

"I would not only be fired, I would be put on trial for this, you know."

"We know, we know." Ginny was practically dancing in her chair.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione said. "We've done worse." She winked at him.

"Yes, but that was for good! This is just… selfish."

"Okay," Ginny said. "You go ask Draco Malfoy what his deal is."

Harry rolled his eyes. He told her that it was possible there would be nothing useful left in the Admin office. Once the memories were examined, and final determinations made from them, they were transferred to the Department of Mysteries. You could only retrieve a memory from the Department of Mysteries with the permission of the Minister of Magic.

"But his trial was months ago," Ginny said. "Will there still be memories of his that haven't been reviewed?"

"Oh, yes," Harry chuckled. "We may have magic, but we're still the government. Everything moves slowly. His memories of the night Dumbledore died probably won't be there, probably examined immediately, but anything else pertaining to upcoming Death Eater trials might still be stored."

Hermione nodded, chewing on the inside of her cheek. What exactly was it that she hoped to find?

~*~

The next week moved slowly. She only saw Draco twice. Once in the lifts the next day, looking exhausted and gaunt, and again on Friday in the Atrium. He caught her eyes both times, and she looked away.

That Saturday at Cornerstone, Morty brought downstairs a large box, letting her know if she found any extra time, he'd appreciate her stocking the new shipment. She opened the box and found the new Mattie McHandry werewolf book.

She closed her eyes and sighed. After stocking the shelves, she would have to notify those who pre-ordered the book. Including Narcissa Malfoy.

She dilly-dallied. She cleaned. She balanced the books. She tried to chat with the hag who stared at her with wide, violet eyes, and then scuttled away. Finally, she wrote to all others on the pre-order list. Once it was getting closer to five o'clock, she figured there was less of a chance that a Malfoy would stroll into Cornerstone within the next hour.

Morty's owl flew back in through the back window, and Hermione attached the very last letter to her leg. She'd written one letter from Hermione J. Granger, friend of Narcissa Malfoy. She'd crumpled that and tossed it. Then she'd written another from Cornerstone, with a post script from Hermione Granger, wishing Narcissa happy reading. She'd tossed that one, too. She settled on a generic letter, just as the last twenty or so pre-orders had received. There was no indication that the letter was from her, except for the fact that Narcissa knew Hermione's handwriting.

She watched the owl fly off and busied herself, peeking at the new book. Fifteen minutes later, Narcissa's grand owl flew in, dropping a note on the windowsill, and waited.

Hermione snatching up the note, praying that it didn't say "thank you, I'll be right in" or "Draco is going to drop by tomorrow."

Morty,

Thank you very much for letting me know that the McHandry book is in. Please send it back with the owl and bill it to the account.

Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione read it twice. The owl clicked its beak at her and she shushed it. It was addressed to Morty, even though she knew Narcissa recognized Hermione's handwriting. It also lacked the "Yours, Narcissa Malfoy" that Hermione knew to be Narcissa's signature. There was truly nothing wrong with the letter, but Hermione still felt like an ex-boyfriend had just asked her to box up his things and mail them.

~*~

Ginny forced her out on a date the following evening. One of the Harpies had a brother that was rather fond of books and was currently working on Centaur relations in Germany, and Ginny had managed to set the two of them up on Sunday evening.

Evan was fine. He was nice. He was quite handsome, really. But she'd considered him… an afterthought. They set up a time to meet up next month when he was in town again, but once the evening was over, she'd already forgotten what date they'd decided on.

Thankfully there had been no paparazzi around for the date. Hermione wasn't sure which was worse though, Rita Skeeter's version of events, or Ginny's.

"And he told Amanda that it went well and he's excited to see you again next month!" Ginny was pouring tea and forcing Hermione to relive the date Monday night.

"Oh, that's nice. Yes, it was a lovely evening." Hermione smiled.

"Lovely?" Ginny's eyes sparkled as she set down a cup in front of Hermione.

"Yes, lovely," she said. Ginny waggled her eyebrows at her and Hermione smiled. "I don't know what you want me to say Ginny! Nothing exciting happened."

"Well, let's hope something exciting happens next month!"

Hermione sipped her tea and asked Ginny about the match that coming weekend.

The next day Hermione arrived at her desk to find a memo waiting for her. She put down her bags and opened it, praying.

Prayers not received. Robards wanted her assistance upstairs. Today… was not her day.

She knocked on Aiden's cubicle wall. He was looking over a file and eating a plum.

"Oi!" He smiled. "The Golden Girl has arrived!"

She scowled at him. "Did you happen to get a notice from Robards this morning?"

"Nope." He chewed. "Does he want your brilliant mind upstairs today?"

"It looks like." She frowned at the note. "Well, I will see you later today, I guess." She turned, heading for the lifts.

"Hey!" Aiden called. "Rosenberg's last day is Thursday."

"As in the day after tomorrow?" She blinked at him. "Already?"

"Yep," he said. "She's going to be having a little celebration at the café down the street after work."

"Oh, very nice. Thanks for letting me know." She tried to leave again, and his voice stopped her.

“Hey, er…” She watched him twirl his quill. “A few of us are thinking of heading to a pub or two after the shindig. Would you want to come with?”

There was something different about his eyes as he asked. She said, “On a weeknight?” and lifted a brow at him.

He smirked. “Come on. Live a little, Granger.”

She blinked at him. “I’ll… I’ll have to see how I’m feeling on Thursday. Maybe.” He smiled at her. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Sure,” he said. “Have fun upstairs!”

As she hopped in the lift she was still trying to decipher Aiden’s invitation. Was it a date? Was it a small group? Did she even want to go?

She waved to Katie Bell as she exited the lift with a gesture that said “I’ll come by later,” and headed to Robards’ office.

“Miss Granger!” Gawain Robards stood from his desk. “We’re so honored that you would assist us again this week.”

Hermione’s eye twitched hearing “this week” instead of “today.”

“Good morning, Mr. Robards,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m honored to be asked.”

“We’ve got more of those runes popping up, and I’d prefer having those whose minds are still bright with their Hogwarts educations to work through them, then those of us who are thirty years behind or so!” He patted his chest.

Hermione smiled. She could possibly see working for Mr. Robards. They had a good rapport and he seemed to get along well with Harry.

“I must confess, Miss Granger,” he continued, “that Mathilda did mention that you are looking into applying for new positions.”

“Yes, I am thinking of making a change.”

“Well, I hope you keep us in mind. Draco Malfoy’s position will be open in December, and we need someone just as bright and analytical to step in.”

Hermione smiled and told him she was thinking about it. She still had hope – foolish hope – that she would be directed somewhere other than the conference room at the end of their meeting, but of course, Robards bid her a good day and told her Mr. Malfoy would fill her in.

Hermione dragged her feet to the conference room. She knocked, out of politeness, and opened the door to find Draco standing over the table, creating piles of paperwork on the table, quill bit between his teeth, hair falling into his eyes. He looked up at her and she cursed him. But he was surprised to see her. He removed the quill from his mouth.

“Robards summoned me.”

He looked away and scratched his jaw. “I told him I had it under control.”

Hermione stood in the doorway. “Well, I’m here now.”

She took a breath and moved to set her notes and quill on the edge of the table. Draco clenched his jaw and moved aside for her to join him in looking at the paperwork. He explained that the D.M.L.E. had been intercepting messages passed in Knockturn Alley and other disreputable locations that identified the location of dark object trades or meeting spots. Similar to the other cases she and Draco had worked on, they had begun using runes to communicate to throw off the Aurors. Robards was interested to know if these messages were related, if there was someone “in charge.”

As he talked, explaining his progress and his current questions, he pointed at piles of paperwork with long fingers and gestured to the runes book, and Hermione was struck again at how good he was at this. How easily he took charge of a room and presented a problem, presented solutions, and presented a course of action.

But he hadn’t looked at her once.

After thirty minutes of Draco returning to what he was reading when she walked in, and Hermione starting from the beginning, reading through the notes and reports from the first interceptions forward, she threw down her quill, pulled her wand and turned to the wall at the far side of the room. She removed the “inspirational” pictures and the plaques, pointed her wand at the table and pasted the messages on the wall, in order.

As one flew out of Draco’s hand, he said, “What are you doing?”

“Trust me. It’s very helpful.”

Several hours and dead ends later, the Rune Wall had expanded and now had a life of its own. She and Draco generally worked in silence unless one of them had a new thought. She was in the middle of listing all the different possible translations for one rune set, when she realized that the hairs at the nape of her neck were standing on end. Draco was watching her. She swallowed and continued writing until his voice shattered the silence.

“It was a mission. From the Dark Lord.”

She gathered herself before tearing her eyes off the page and looking up at him. “What kind of mission?”

He was leaning back in his chair and if she didn’t know any better, she’d assume he was slouching. But she knew Malfoys didn’t slouch.

“The worst kind.” He clenched his jaw. She didn’t dare ask him what that meant.

“So, after finding an empty house… you decided to do some redecorating?”

He swallowed, and she watched his throat move. His eyes cast down on the papers in front of him.

“That was Yaxley’s design.”

Yaxley. He wasn’t alone.

“But your blood?”

He gave the table a rueful smile. “Why spill his own?”

She was realizing she had no idea what “truth” looked like on him. Not that he’d always lied, but she just had no previous conversation to draw upon. But there was something here not being said.

She watched his eyes, followed the path of his straight nose, down to his tight lips, found the tension in his jaw.

To buy, to sell, to save.

With his eyes still on his notes, his mouth opened. “What other *secrets* did my father spill to you.”

She blinked. He assumed Lucius told her about the blood on the wall. How strange. It was a week and a half later, and Draco was still trying to piece together her conversation with Lucius. Then she remembered he wouldn’t get a chance to ask his father directly until December. One visit a month.

“Your father didn’t tell me anything about that,” she said, and his eyes flipped up to her. “You told me not to go home. So, of course, I went.”

He frowned at her as a knock rapped on the door.

“Hey, Malfoy.” Harry stepped into the room, looking down at paperwork in his hands. He looked up, seeing Hermione there. “Oh, uh… You’re helping again?”

“Robards sent for me,” she responded. She sent Harry a look that said, “I’m fine.”

“Er, well. There’s been another message intercepted.”

Draco and Hermione jumped from their chairs and raced for the pages in Harry’s hands. Hermione grabbed it first and held it in front of her, reading over the scribbles and piecing in the details they’d gleaned from the other messages. She could feel Draco reading it over her shoulder.

“Well, this fits with the Northwest Germanic, but this over here fits the Scandinavian.”

“We’d ruled out the Scandinavian,” Draco said. “It must be the Germanic.”

“But now that we have this, we can’t rule out Scandinavian.” Hermione ran back to the table to start cross-referencing her notes, while Draco plucked the message from her hand.

“Oh,” she heard Harry say. She looked up, and Harry was looking at the Rune Wall. “You… made a Wall.”

“Does she do that a lot?” Draco asked Harry.

Harry looked at him with a smile. “It’s a recent thing.” Hermione looked up at him, and he was giving her a mischievous grin. “Are you two pausing for lunch?”

She saw Draco check his timepiece and she did the same. Ten past noon.

“Oh, er, yes,” she said. “I suppose so.”

Draco quickly returned to his chair, organizing notes.

“Café?” Harry said. And Hermione could see the croissants dancing in his eyes. She nodded and Harry turned to Draco. “Malfoy? Are you hungry?”

“Thank you, but, no. I have a prior engagement.” Draco made a final note and began packing up.

She told him she’d see him after lunch, and left the room with Harry, who rushed off to set down his paperwork and grab his coins. Hermione wandered to Katie Bell’s desk to see if she was still there.

"Hermione Granger." A silky voice.

Hermione turned and found herself face to face with Katya Viktor. She felt rooted to the spot as Katya glided toward her. Katya smiled. Damn her. She was stunning.

"Hello..." Hermione tried to say more but was caught trying to figure out if Katya's eyes were hazel or honey.

"Hello, I'm Katya." White, white teeth. "I've so wanted to meet you." A perfectly manicured hand reached out, burgundy nails. Hermione shook it. "I'm a friend of Draco's."

"I... Yes, hello. I'm Hermione." How idiotic. And her nails were chipped.

"I've been dying to meet you, but Draco says you are so busy!" She laughed and the sound warmed the space. She lacked the harsh accent of Viktor Krum. “But, of course you are! You’re Hermione Granger!”

“I… I am.”

“I must say,” and Katya moved her sparkly purse under her arm as she leveled an intent gaze on Hermione. “I have been following you very closely over the years. All of Durmstrang was so interested in the fifteen-year-old who had caught Viktor Krum’s attention!” She laughed

and touched Hermione's arm lightly. Hermione felt very stiff, and wondered if this was some kind of spell…

She continued, "But then I kept seeing your name in the papers and you were always doing something wonderful like saving a species, or you'd taken on dark wizards all by yourself and I…" She paused and shook her head. "I'm so sorry, I'm gushing! I've just so wanted to meet you."

Damn her. She was intoxicatingly lovely, too.

"I… Well, thank you. It's nice to meet you as well." She smiled and felt very dull. "I've heard so much about you."

"I'm sure that's a lie!" she laughed. Always laughing. "There's not much to hear!"

Katya pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

Beautiful. Charming. Graceful.

Just then, she heard the door to the conference room open. She turned, and saw Draco's face at the very moment he realized that she and Katya were meeting. He paused with his hand on the door, coat tucked under his arm.

Prior engagement.

"Draco!" Katya cooed. Her voice was excited without the shrill quality that Hermione's could get. "Look who I finally got to meet!"

She watched as Draco opened his mouth, looking between the two women in the hallway. Eyes neutral, with a smile that didn't pull his cheeks.

"Wonderful," he said. "Granger, this is Katya."

Hermione nodded, and Katya said, "I've been gushing. I'm sorry. I just can't believe I ran into her!"

Hermione was spinning a bit. Where was Harry.

"Well," she started. "It was lovely to meet you Katya." And she shook her hand again. "Enjoy your lunch together."

"Oh, but are you free to join us?" Katya said with wide eyes.

Skilled in hosting. Table manners.

She didn't dare look at Draco. "Oh, that's very kind, but I already have lunch plans. Thank you, Katya."

"We will have to have a proper conversation sometime!" Katya smiled. "I would love to take you to lunch and pick your brain. I am currently working with a charity invested in dwarf and

house-elf rights and I would love to hear some of your thoughts."

Oh, fuck off Katya.

"That… that sounds perfect." Hermione smiled. She hated her. She hated her because she couldn't hate her.

She glanced at Draco as he cracked his neck and took a deep breath. He placed his hand lightly on Katya's back.

"I'll see you after lunch, Granger." He looked to her briefly before turning to guide Katya to the elevator.

"So wonderful to meet you, Hermione!" Katya sang.

Hermione watched them walk away, Draco's back stiff and Katya swaying, chatting, smiling, perfect-ing.

She tried to remember which book it was she giftwrapped for her.

Harry appeared around the corner.

"God, where the fuck have you been," Hermione snarled and pushed past him.

"What…?"

They went to lunch in the café. Hermione returned upstairs and went right to work. Draco walked in just after one and she could feel his eyes on her the rest of the afternoon. They made headway on the runes, but would have to work in the conference room again tomorrow.

She returned upstairs to gather her things at the end of the day and ran into Aiden.

"How'd it go? Did you solve world hunger by noon?" He winked at her.

She looked at him. Grinning at her. Open. Honest. Nice.

"Aiden, I would love to go out with you all on Thursday. Tell me where to meet you."

His grin turned into a smile.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Longest chapter yet! Thanks for all the reviews, everyone. I know we are getting slightly... impatient? But things needed to get nice and awkward before we could move forward. So I present you with... more awkwardness. With a side of excitement.

Wednesday, she and Draco worked in silence for the majority of the day. She stopped at the café for a cup of coffee on her way up, and when she arrived at the Level 2 conference room, she saw Draco quickly vanish the coffee cup he'd brought up with his tea for her.

Thursday, they needed to talk to each other more. They couldn't land on any definite answers on the runes case, so they prepared reports for Robards, listing the possibilities. She headed back to Level 4 with thirty minutes left of the day, hoping for some time at her *own* desk before heading out.

Once she'd settled into her cubicle, Aiden knocked.

"Hey, long time, no see," he said. She smiled, politely. "Are you still interested in meeting up for drinks tonight?"

"Yes, definitely," she said, moving paperwork around. Ginny had slipped a tube of mascara into her bag just for the occasion. "I will meet you over at Rosenberg's party, though. I want to try and get a few things done at my desk."

"Great," he smiled at her. "I'll see you soon then!"

She stared at the spot he'd vacated. It was worth a shot. She might as well see if she could stand him outside of work.

She worked for a little while, listening to people bid each other goodnight, and when she checked her watch it was half past five already. She quickly closed up, making notes, and was glad she was not needed to finish the reports with Draco tomorrow, because this pile was ridiculous.

She conjured a mirror and attempted brushing the black goo on her eyelashes, and then headed out. She arrived at the café after the group had already ordered food. Aiden waved her over and directed her to a chair next to him that he'd saved for her, and she was pleasantly surprised at how well Aiden included her in conversations, especially the ones she had no interest in.

She sipped on a glass of water, politely declining half of Aiden's greasy sandwich and French fries, and she found herself laughing more, trying to get to know her coworkers better. Aiden rested his arm around the back of her chair, but he didn't touch her shoulders or neck like Ron used to. She always found that so nerve-wracking.

Once the party began winding down, she bid Rochelle a happy retirement, and blushed when Rochelle asked her quietly if she might mind signing something for her granddaughter for Christmas.

Aiden steered her outside with another two Ministry coworkers she recognized and one of their girlfriends. They took a nice walk for several blocks, and Hermione took the opportunity to get to know the girlfriend better. All in all, it was a pleasant evening so far. That was the thought running through her head when Aiden guided her into the next pub, hand resting politely on her back, and managed to knock the shoulder of a blonde girl on the arm of Draco Malfoy.

"Sorry, love!" Aiden paused when he caught sight of her date. "Malfoy! Fancy running into you!"

Aiden launched into a verbose story about Rosenberg's retirement party as Hermione cursed her luck. She looked up at Draco and saw his eyes on Aiden's arm, still curled behind her back.

"O'Connor, Granger, this is Noelle," Draco said once Aiden was finished.

Noelle smiled and laughed for no reason whatsoever. Her blonde hair was cropped short and curled loosely around her face and she had a tiny button nose and blue eyes. Hermione thought she recognized her as one of Draco's tabloid dates in the past.

"Hi! Aiden," he introduced himself. "Nice to meet you." Aiden shook her hand.

"Hi, I'm Noelle." She was American. And vapid. She assumed.

"Hello," Hermione said. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Oh, my gosh! You are??" Noelle's eyes lit up and she grabbed Hermione's hand to shake it. "This is so cool!"

Hermione's eyes flickered to Draco in time to see him take a deep breath and rub his temple.

Noelle was still talking. "We had news of the war in the U.S. too, and they would always mention the three of you! Ron Weasley and Harry Potter aren't here too, are they?" Noelle looked over Hermione's shoulder, as if she could wish them there.

"Er, no. I'm just grabbing drinks with coworkers tonight."

"Oh, Draco we *have* to stay now!" Noelle turned to Draco and grabbed his elbow. Hermione thought of white teeth and silky brown hair and tan long legs and suddenly was irrationally upset. How dare he do this to Katya. That angel.

"Yes! Grab a table with us!" Aiden was flagging down the friends they'd walked in with, getting them to push bar tables together. "Malfoy and I will grab a round of drinks."

"Awesome!" Noelle bubbled. "Hermione, sit next to me!" And Noelle took the stool on the end, patting the one next to it. This was… not the night she'd anticipated.

Once a stoic Draco and an animated Aiden had left for the bar, and Hermione settled next to her new best friend, she turned to Noelle and said, "What brings you to London, Noelle?"

"I'm home from Muggle university, visiting family," she said brightly.

"Oh, your family lives here?" Hermione said, unwrapping the scarf from around her neck.

"Yep! I was three during the First Wizarding War, so my dad sent me to America to stay with relatives and go to school out there."

Hermione nodded, not fully interested. "And how do you know Draco?" She tried innocence.

"Oh, our families have been friends for years," Noelle waved a hand, as if this was of no importance. "But you two went to school together, yeah?"

"Yes, we sure did." She looked up and Draco and Aiden were returning to the table. Draco levitated all the drinks, setting them down at each person – even Aiden's friends who he didn't know. Noelle got a frilly cocktail, firewhiskies for Draco and Aiden's two friends, wine for the girlfriend and Butterbeer for her and Aiden.

Aiden was trailing behind him, saying, "I got the next round, Malfoy!" Draco looked like he'd had quite enough of him already, which made her smile. Aiden grabbed the stool on Hermione's right, and Draco sat across from Noelle. An odd little picture.

"So, Aiden, what do you do?" Noelle asked, placing her delicate mouth on the straw of her drink in a way that Hermione found to be both adorable and vulgar.

"Hermione and I both work in the Department of Magical Creatures for the Ministry. We're both specialized in dragons."

"Oh, my gosh, *dragons*! I *love* dragons!"

Hermione raised her brow and took a sip of her Butterbeer.

“Yeah?” Aiden smiled brightly. “Do you have a favorite kind?”

“The blue one!” Noelle said.

Hermione blinked. “The… Swedish Short-Snout?”

“Whichever one is blue. Blue is my favorite color!” Noelle giggled and slurped her drink. Hermione flipped her eyes over to Draco and gave him a look that she hoped conveyed “are you fucking serious.”

He met her eyes and looked down at his firewhisky. She was still watching him when a hand dropped on his shoulder, Slytherin ring on the thumb.

“I’d recognize the back of your head anywhere, mate.”

Draco looked back at the Slytherin who’d just interrupted her glaring contest, and she was shocked to see his lips part into a huge, honest grin.

“What are you doing here, you bastard?!” Draco stood and gave the bloke a hug. She finally got a good look at his face.

Marcus Flint. He’d gotten his teeth fixed.

She watched Draco as he met with his old friend and Quidditch captain, watching him radiate warmth as they quickly caught up before Draco turned to them.

“Marcus, you remember Noelle Ogden?”

Something switched in Hermione’s brain, hearing Noelle’s last name. She filed it away for later when Marcus gave Noelle a friendly hug. She didn’t have any happy memories of Marcus Flint, and was reminded of this when his eyes landed on her.

“Hermione Granger,” he said. Something sparkled behind his eyes, and Hermione wasn’t quite sure she liked it. But he wasn’t sneering at her, which she supposed was progress. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.”

“Hello, Flint. How have you been?”

“Well, thank you.” He was still staring at her, gaze gliding over her face. “Are Potter and Weasley close behind?” He raised a brow and took a look around the pub.

“No,” she said. “I’m on my own tonight.” She raised a brow, giving him a look that she hoped said that she could handle herself, even if the ratio of Slytherins had just risen.

Flint, Draco and Noelle started catching up, asking each other about old families, what was Gregory Goyle up to, how’s your father Noelle, congratulations on your business Draco…

Hermione felt Aiden lean into her. “Is that Marcus Flint?”

“Yes,” she said, bringing her half empty glass to her lips.

“I think he locked me in Moaning Myrtle’s Bathroom when I was a first year.”

Hermione snorted, finding this whole situation too comical and too taxing. She laughed, wiping her eyes, and shifting to see Aiden smiling at her. When she turned back to watch Flint again, Draco’s eyes had just left them.

She followed the conversation with Marcus Flint for a bit, then turned and tried to get an understanding of where Aiden and his friends’ conversation had gotten to. She hovered on the edge of each conversation, quietly sipping her Butterbeer, watching Draco’s face light up every time Flint made a joke or brought up a memory. When Noelle slurped the end of her drink – like the commoner she was – Draco and Flint offered to get another round. As they left, Noelle turned to her.

“This is fun, isn’t it?” Her eyes were wide and starting to glaze from the cocktails. Hermione tried a smile and thought that *Katya* would *never* allow herself to become *inebriated* in front of strangers. She had more class. She was so offended by this girl on Katya’s behalf… obviously.

“How long have you and Draco been seeing each other?” Hermione asked, and immediately sobered. How had that come out of her mouth?

“Oh,” Noelle laughed. “We’re not really *seeing* each other.” She sucked the melted ice through her straw, and Hermione wondered if Noelle knew about Katya – having been from the states, perhaps she didn’t get the *Prophet*. Hermione brought the end of her Butterbeer to her lips. Noelle said, “He’s only really after my money.” And grinned at her while Hermione coughed.

“Wh-what?” She grabbed a napkin to keep from spitting.

“I mean, not *my* money. My *father’s* money.” Noelle cackled at the look on Hermione’s face. “My father’s Tiberius Ogden. He wants him to invest in his company, and join the Board of Directors.”

Ogden. That’s why it was familiar. Noelle and her brother were the heirs to the Ogden’s Old Firewhisky fortune. Merlin, half the table was drinking the stuff.

“Oh,” Hermione started. “I hadn’t realized…”

“So, Draco’s schmoozing us, essentially. We’re going to have lunch with my father this weekend.” She stabbed at her ice, casually.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Er, I mean… does that upset you at all?”

“Nope!” She laughed. “Draco Malfoy can buy me drinks and take me to parties all he wants! I mean, damn, he’s *gorgeous*.” Noelle stuck her tongue out at her, and Hermione laughed.

Alright. Perhaps Noelle wasn’t so bad.

Draco and Flint returned with a round for the entire table. As they approached, Flint said something that made Draco laugh. *Really* laugh. His face split and his eyes crinkled and the sound boomed. It was lovely.

Aiden and his friends thanked them for the drinks, and she heard one of them whisper, "I had no idea Draco Malfoy was so nice."

A second Butterbeer slipped into her hands, but she hadn't asked for it. She really shouldn't drink it if she wanted any chance of Apparating home. Perhaps they had a food menu at this pub.

Flint took the only open seat at the table – the one across from her and next to Draco. Noelle was giggling next to her at something Draco said.

"Do you not drink, Granger?"

She looked up and Flint was examining her over the top of his glass as he sipped.

"No, I do." She wrapped her hands around the glass. "Just slowly." She met his eyes and a challenge was there.

"I bet you're taking points from us all in your head." He smirked at her. "'Ten points from Slytherin for having more than one drink per hour.'" He nodded at Noelle. "'Ten points from – whatever-the-fuck house you were in at Ilvermorny – for giggling out of turn.'"

Noelle proceeded to giggle. Hermione kept a cautious gaze on Flint. She had plenty of comebacks running through her head, but all of them would put a direct stop to this evening.

"Were you a goody-goody, Hermione?" Noelle asked, smiling.

Before she could answer – "Oh, she was the worst!" Flint said, eyes on her. "Even before she was a prefect she was walking around like Head Girl." His eyes were dancing, lightly teasing, but she could see the Slytherin working. She kept her eyes on him, not looking to Draco. He was sitting quietly. "Tell me, Granger," Flint continued, "did you ever break the rules, even once?"

Why was he doing this? He was goading her, but why did it feel like flirting? Her hands tightened on her glass.

"I broke the rules loads of times," she said to him. She picked up her Butterbeer, not blinking. "But unlike you, I never got caught." She sipped. Punctuating and ending the conversation.

Flint smirked. Noelle giggled. Draco shifted.

She spent the next hour in this awkward limbo. She tried desperately to latch on to Aiden's conversation, which he graciously would catch her up on, but Flint kept pulling her back towards him. Asking questions about Harry and Ron, prodding at her to relive disastrous memories from Hogwarts. Draco would frown every time Flint would speak to her and stay silent. Noelle would giggle. She eventually turned her entire body toward Aiden, hoping her physical language said she was done.

Aiden offered to buy the next round, and after declining a third drink she took the opportunity to grab his chair and scoot closer to the girlfriend – whose name she'd already forgotten – and away from the Slytherins. They chatted briefly as the group started morphing. Noelle took a trip to the loo causing Draco and Marcus Flint to stand, like the pure-blood gentlemen they were raised to be, and one of Aiden's friends followed him to the bar. Flint and Draco remained standing, stepping slightly away, laughing. When the girlfriend saw a friend of hers and excused herself, Hermione sipped her drink and began concocting her escape plan. It was nearing nine o'clock, and she wanted to get to work early tomorrow to make progress on her desk.

She shook her head, realizing that she'd been staring at the woodgrain on the bar table for thirty seconds or so, letting her mind run through her tasks for tomorrow. She must have looked quite soused.

The Butterbeer was making her so warm. Hermione finished the last of it and placed her glass on the table, reaching into her bag for a hair tie. She threw her hair up in a bun and discreetly used a bar napkin to pat her neck dry.

She looked around and found Aiden talking with a familiar face, possibly a Hogwarts alum. Draco had his arm around Noelle's waist, chatting with Flint. She decided to run to the loo to splash cold water on her face. And then maybe she'd bid Aiden goodnight and go home.

Slipping off the stool proved challenging, and she blamed that second Butterbeer and her lack of dinner. If only she'd ordered something at the first café, but all the food looked so greasy.

She'd heard Ginny tell her once that you never know how sloshed you really are until you stand up, and she was feeling the full effect of that for the first time. She wandered over to the hall with the bathrooms, and found three girls leaning up against the wall, waiting. She leaned with them for a moment, fanning herself. The girl closest to her leaned in to her.

"If you think you're going to heave, you can go ahead of me."

Hermione smiled. "That's very kind, but I'm just so warm. And a little dizzy."

"Did you have one too many? I'm trying to pace myself by standing in line for the bathroom, but usually I'm in your shoes." She smiled a crooked smile at her. Her bangs were too short for her forehead.

"I guess so." Hermione closed her eyes. It felt so nice to lean against the cool wall. "No, wait." She stood tall again. "I've only had two Butterbeers tonight."

"Maybe it was something you ate? Not settling?"

"Right. That must be it." Hermione pushed off the wall. "I'm just going to step out for a second."

The girl said something to her, but she wasn't listening. She was concentrating on walking. Her heels were wobbling underneath her… She looked down at her flats. She wasn't wearing heels.

She found the exit sign in the air, floating above a side door, and pushed her way out, feeling the cool air against her cheeks before her foot missed the step down. She didn't even see it. She righted herself by throwing her hands out and onto the ground, feeling the cement scratch her palms and hearing the door close behind her. She stood tall again and the momentum threw her back against the door. She turned to her left and crept along the wall, away from the exit.

This wasn't right.

She hadn't eaten. It couldn't have been food poisoning.

Poisoning.

Hermione gasped and leaned against the brick. She felt her wand against her hip. Her bag still across her shoulder. Her body was sliding. She tried to stay tall. She was sliding left. Her hand found a dirty crate and kept her up, leaning.

She needed Harry. She needed to…

Where was Harry?

Harry wasn't here.

She needed to get home. She had ipecac there. She pulled her wand and it dropped to the ground, clacking against her eardrums. She leaned to grab it and fell forward again. Her fingers grasped it and she used the crate to push herself up.

How did this happen? She'd had two Butterbeers. It was in the Butterbeer. Someone had slipped something into her drink.

She needed to throw up. To empty it before it entered her blood further. There was a spell for it. What was it?

Who did this? Who handled her drinks? She tried to remember what the bartender looked like. The streetlamp across from her blurred into two. Would she die? In this alley?

Something was familiar. Something pulling at her. Slipped something into her drink. There was something so… Muggle about it. Why wasn't she dead yet? What was the point?

Date drug. That was the phrase.

Drugged? Who drugged her? The only person to give her drinks tonight –

"Granger?"

The heat left her. As she dragged her eyes to the door to see Draco Malfoy scrutinizing her, she felt a chill like ice.

"Malfoy." She whispered. Her tongue heavy.

He let the door close behind him, and it was silent. It was only the two of them. Her heart was racing.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked, words tripping.

“About to ask you the same question.” He looked down at her wand in her hand. “I hope you’re not trying to Apparate, Granger. You don’t look like you’re in any state.”

“Why are you out here?” She tried again. Maybe he didn’t hear her the first time. She tried to focus her eyes on him as he walked to her but he was blurring.

“Just how many did you have at the retirement party?”

… first right to auction them off to the highest bidder… for whatever purpose they would like.

She felt her heartbeat in her ears, spinning, and her lungs grabbed for air.

“How did you know I’d come out here? What do you want from me!”

He stood in front of her now, two steps away. His face came into focus and he was squinting at her like she was a stray dog he needed to leash.

“What’s wrong with you?” he said. He might have taken a step closer.

… for whatever purpose they would like.

She clutched her wand in her right hand, wood indenting her skin, and tried to put up her left, telling him to stop, but she heard the words tumble from her lips and they were jumbled.

“You’re bleeding,” he said, and she remembered the sting as she fell forward, palms catching her. She turned her palm over and Draco reached for her, grabbing her left wrist to look at the cut.

The moment his fingers brushed her skin, she exploded.

Magic shot down her arm, into her chest and down to her curl her toes. It was warm and cool at the same time. There was buzzing in her bones, and her blood rocketed through her veins, and she knew something was wrong but it felt so good. She gasped and dropped her wand to the ground as she scrambled to touch him.

She grabbed his collar to pull him closer, fingers sliding up onto his neck, burning as she touched skin, and she must have launched herself at him because she was falling forward into him. He gasped as he caught her, and her cut left hand wound into his hair. *Finally.*

Her toes barely scraped the ground as he righted them, his hands on her hips, and her face was against his neck. The scent of him made her fingers curl and she sighed into his ear.

“Draco…”

She needed more. Her lips found the spot where his jaw cut a beautiful line away from his neck and she kissed him there. His skin was so warm. She needed more.

She kissed a line down his jaw, letting her tongue taste him, gasping for breath, and finally his arms moved.

One hand stayed on her hip, squeezing and moving slowly to press her pelvis closer, and one danced up her back, moving up to her neck. She moaned as he touched her skin.

“Granger, what are you doing?” he wheezed.

Her lips were making their way to his, and one of them was shaking. This… wasn’t right. She was burning for him, but how did they get here.

She knew it was the drug. She’d been poisoned and was attacking him with her body and mouth. This wasn’t fair. This wasn’t how it was meant to happen.

She gathered any strength she had left as her mouth sucked on his chin, his head turning towards her, and pushed him away. He stumbled two steps back and the force of it threw her back as well, landing against the wall, head smacking against the bricks and she saw stars.

Every ounce of her body wanted to reattach to him, but she could feel the buzzing stop, the spinning in her abdomen slowing.

“What did you do to me?” she croaked, her vision blurring again, though she didn’t know if it was due to the slight head injury.

He was panting. She couldn’t make out his face, her head heavy, and she was glad for the wall behind her.

“What?” he whispered.

“Why are you doing this?” she said, slowly coming back to sense and remembering that she was alone in a quiet alley with the boy who wanted to sell her… or buy her. And she wasn’t sure which was worse right now. And her wand had rolled away.

“Granger?”

And she was slipping to the left again. It was okay. She knew the crates would catch her again. She put her hand out to stop herself, and gasped when she felt Draco’s arm come around her waist. It wasn’t like before. She wasn’t affected by the poison. Maybe it was over?

“What’s happened to you?” he demanded. Her head lolled and he must have tried to help her, because suddenly it was all back. The dancing electricity. The burning. His hand was on her cheek, keeping her head up and she groaned and attached her hand over his, keeping him there.

His other hand was already on her waist lightly and she used her free one to grab his shirt again.

“Oh, god, Draco.”

She turned her head and began kissing his palm, then lapping at his wrist, holding it to her. She moaned, sucking on the thin skin. She could feel his breath on her face. His hand left her waist and supported them against the wall as he moved closer, and the image of Draco and Katya came to mind. Just like this. Outside of a bar, pressing her up against a wall.

“Granger…” His voice slipped over her like oil.

“Stop!” She dropped his hand and pushed. He released her and she could breathe again. “Don’t do this!”

The burning stopped and just before her vision blurred again, she saw him step back, holding both hands up in surrender. His cheeks pink and his breath misting in the air between them.

She leaned heavily against the wall. “Why did you follow me out here?” Her voice was clear at least.

He kept his hands held in front of him, fingers spread. “I saw you exit.”

Why did that matter? Where was Noelle?

He wasn’t going to **buy** *you. He was going to* **save** *you.*

She shook her head, bouncing Lucius Malfoy’s voice around until it was silent.

“What did you give me?” she snarled at him. She began to sweat, a mist hazing her sight, and she knew it would stop if he would just let her touch him again. She squeezed her fists.

“Give you?” He squinted at her. And she noticed that his hair was jumbled from her fingers in the most attractive way.

“*What did you put in my drink, Malfoy?!*”

She watched as he opened his mouth, and closed it. He brought his hands down and stared at the door they’d come from. Then he blurred again and she couldn’t watch him.

“What is it? How do I stop it?” Her words tumbled again, and she felt her body sliding. She heard him step forward to help-- “DON’T TOUCH ME!”

His form stopped. She grabbed for the crates and leaned. “Why did you poison me? What do you *want*?”

He remained silent as the world continued to spin. Her brain worked. The point of the drug would be to take advantage of a “willing” partner. But he’d stopped every time she’d pushed him away.

She looked up at him. He was scowling down at her, his hands clenching and unclenching, his jaw doing the same. He wanted to help her, but she wouldn’t let him touch her.

Maybe it wasn't him.

He took a breath, opening his mouth to speak, and the side door squelched open.

"There you guys are!" Aiden.

Hermione closed her eyes and focused on her breathing.

"We're talking about heading to the pub down the street," Aiden said, his cheery voice cutting through the alley. "What do you think?"

She opened her eyes and tried to stand up tall. It was a bit easier. It was clear from Aiden's face that he found nothing wrong with his… "date"… being alone in an alley with another man. She envied that optimism and naiveté.

"What's going on?" he said. And she realized they hadn't responded. She looked at Draco and his eyes were on the ground.

Maybe it wasn't him.

"I… I had one too many." She swallowed, and felt Draco's eyes. "Draco caught me trying to Apparate home. And I'm in no state." She laughed lightly.

"Granger," Aiden laughed. "You're such a lightweight!" His face was sliding in and out of focus. She pushed hair out of her face and heard him say, "You're cut?"

Aiden reached for her wrist. Draco jumped, and she was too slow. He touched her skin. And nothing.

"What happened?" Aiden asked, still looking down at her hand, oblivious to them.

Hermione looked from where Aiden's fingers touched her bare skin up to Draco, to find him looking at her wrist too. If she was only affected by Draco's touch, why would anyone else have done this to her?

His eyes slid up to her, and she glared at him, tears blurring his face.

"I fell."

Aiden chuckled. "Okay, let's get you home, Granger." He swung an arm around her shoulders, and Hermione watched Draco take them in. He looked back at the ground. Aiden said, "Good chatting with you tonight, Malfoy!" and began to steer her down the alley towards an Apparition point.

"Granger." His voice gave her chills. The good kind and the bad.

Aiden turned them around and she saw Malfoy retrieving her wand from between the crates and holding it out to them. She took it.

“Oh ho!” Aiden laughed. “The Golden Girl taken down by a few Butterbeers, huh?” He squeezed her shoulder and turned them back down the alley. She watched her feet as they walked, feeling more in control the further away they got from Draco.

She frowned, tears pricking behind her eyes. Aiden didn’t know how right he was. She had let her guard down with the Slytherins. And she’d been attacked.

~*~

Aiden had helped her up the stairs, made sure she got the door open to her flat, and had given her a silly smile as he said they should do this again sometime. Hermione almost laughed, or cried.

She shut the door behind her and found Harry and Ginny watching television. They smiled at her. She dropped her bag, entered the kitchen, opened the cabinet underneath the sink and pulled out the ipecac. She pulled her hair back, took a swallow, and coughed over the sink.

She heard Ginny’s quiet footsteps against the tiles. She placed her hand on her back and rubbed, grabbing the ipecac bottle and reading the label.

“What’s wrong?”

Hermione was gagging and crying and she squeezed the counter as she heaved, regretting losing the taste of Draco’s skin even as she hated him.

~*~

She stayed up all night, running through the events of the evening and researching love potions. With a clearer mind not muddled with panic, it was easier to surmise that Marcus Flint had something to do with this.

Draco had only touched her skin when concerned about the cut on her hand. Had he slipped her a potion and followed her outside to….

Had that been the goal, he could have made contact with her skin immediately. He seemed just as confused about the effects.

Also, why?

And before the number 35,000 could run through her brain, she amended: Why now? Why in a public place?

She went in to work about an hour late. She headed directly to the second floor, and straight into the conference room. Draco was standing over the table, papers splayed out before him. He lifted his head when the door opened and locked eyes on her. She shut the door behind her and held her head high.

“I’m sorry I accused you of drugging me last night,” she said. He set down the paperwork he was looking through and turned to face her, the entire twelve-person conference table between them. “I had… I had just figured out what was happening when you stepped outside.

I thank you for coming out to check on me, but I know now that your intention was not to follow me out to…" She looked over his shoulder and swallowed. "I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I was scared."

She looked back at him and he was looking down at the desk. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle. He tossed it to her and, surprisingly, she caught it. There was one drop of a silvery potion inside.

"Ashwinder egg, asphodel, and several other things," he said. "Its effects should be a slow heating process, followed by dizziness and disorientation, and eventually lust when touched by the person whose hair has been added to the potion." He stared at the bottle as she examined it. "It was Flint."

She looked up at him. "And he used your hair, and not his own?"

He swallowed and as his throat moved she saw the bruise on his neck from her mouth. She looked down at his right wrist and saw another.

"Marcus has very interesting ways of amusing himself." He kept his eyes on the papers. She wondered why he didn't use a glamor on his neck and wrist. His knuckle was scraped, too. From the wall?

She pocketed the bottle. "Thank you for coming outside to check on me. And thank you for not… taking advantage of the situation."

He breathed a laugh. It was almost a sneer. Was that funny? Was it an outrageous idea that he would have taken it any further? She felt embarrassed for even mentioning it.

"I must have a different definition of 'taking advantage of the situation,'" he said, giving the table a condescending smile.

She frowned. He felt guilty. She thought of his hand running up her back and the way his mouth almost turned towards her. The way he stepped into her, pressing her back against the brick wall.

"It could have been a lot worse last night." She turned and left him there.

She took the lift down to Level 4. She got to her desk and Aiden popped his head out.

"There she is!" She could punch him. "Feeling better? Ya know, we missed quite a bit of fun last night."

She grimaced. "Really?"

"Yeah! Pub brawl! Malfoy and Marcus Flint!"

She stopped, heart beating. "What happened?"

"I guess right after we left, Malfoy went back inside and started wailing on Flint! I guess he was flirting with Noelle or something?"

“Huh. Sorry to have missed it.” She smiled at him and went to her desk.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays to everyone! Much love to you all.

Hermione had never been more scared to open the paper in the days following the pub night with Marcus Flint. It wasn't until Monday that she finally stopped looking for pictures of Draco pushing her up against a wall.

She thought of Lucius Malfoy, and Draco's inheritance, and prayed.

Harry helped her file a report with the D.M.L.E. about the incident. Or, more accurately, Harry *forced* her to file a report with the D.M.L.E. about the incident. He said if she didn't file the report, he would go after Flint himself.

She filed it anonymously, much to Harry's dismay. Harry told her that anonymous reports were harder to substantiate, and harder to investigate.

"I don't really care one way or the other about Flint, Harry," she said on Monday morning. He'd come to their flat to bring her the paperwork. "I just want this potion brought to the Auror's attention. I don't want this happening to anyone else."

"*I* care about Flint." He glared at her and she looked away. "I want to be the one to retrieve him and throw him in Azkaban."

"I have no proof that it was him. I have Draco's word. If he is brought into this and we are questioned and if it reaches Skeeter's ears…." She shook her head. "I can't… I can't do this anymore. I can't fear the day Lucius Malfoy hears about this."

"This shouldn't be about Lucius Malfoy! This should be about justice!" Harry threw his arms out to the sides, wide and questioning her.

She turned away from him, frowning out the window. It was raining. “Everything is about Lucius Malfoy, Harry.”

~*~

By Tuesday she could hardly make out the bruises on Draco’s neck and wrist.

By Thursday she’d forgotten the taste of him.

And on the following Monday, the whisper of “*Granger*” across her ear had finally evaporated into the wind.

~*~

On Tuesday evening, she found herself at the Burrow. Bill and Fleur were visiting before they headed out of town for the entire month of December, and Molly was in quite a state, complaining because they had to schedule a weeknight instead of the entire weekend. Hermione was exhausted after work, and wished she could excuse herself from the evening, but Ginny threatened her, practically at wandpoint.

“Oh, no you don’t, Granger.” She tossed a sweater across her bed, looking for the perfect outfit. “I need you there so my mother will harp on you about Ron. That way she won’t harp on *me* about when Harry and I are getting married.”

Ginny abruptly began changing her clothes, and Hermione looked away, twitching at the idea of Ginny and Harry getting married. Weren’t they all still thirteen years old, sitting at the Gryffindor table, watching Seamus burn his eyebrows off?

Hermione wasn’t inside the Burrow for five minutes before Molly asked her about Ron. Apparently he would be home for Christmas Eve, but they had a game on Christmas Day.

“He’s told you this, of course?” Molly said, licking a spoon in the kitchen.

“Er, no. We’ve both been terribly busy.”

“Well, of course, you’re invited over that evening. That way you two can see each other!”

Hermione watched as Molly wiped her hands on her dress and used her wand to season the stew. She hadn’t heard anything from Ron about the two of them, then.

It was a quiet evening after that. Fleur sat between her and Ginny in the living room, which Ginny found rather irritating. Ginny found an excuse to get up, leaving Hermione alone with Fleur.

They chatted for a quite a while about books and house elves – the only topics anyone could discuss with her, apparently. She watched Fleur as she moved, as she talked, and she

wondered if she also possessed skills in dancing, interior design, and balancing the financials.

“Fleur,” Hermione asked, after a pause, “do you know of a Madame Michele?”

Fleur’s bright face darkened. “Oh, yes.” She raised a brow in distaste. “I know ‘er quite well.”

“Oh, did you… Did you take manners classes from her?” Hermione sipped her cocoa.

“I saw ‘er twice a week for ten years,” Fleur said. “She iz an abominable woman.”

“I hear she is the top manners and charms teacher for pure-bloods.”

“Oh, yes!” Fleur turned to her, gracefully. “She is ze best! Zat doesn’t mean I ‘ave to like ‘er!” She laughed. “Why do you ask?”

Thankfully Molly Weasley announced dinner right then. She sat next to Harry and watched Fleur quietly across the table during the meal. She held her spoon just like Narcissa did. She dipped her utensil into the stew, taking small bites, being careful not to spill. Hermione watched, and found herself mimicking the behavior. Every three spoonfuls, Fleur would bring her napkin to her mouth. It was hypnotic. She would have no moisture her lips, but she would still pat them all the same. Whenever Fleur would add to a conversation, she found the exact moment to do so for her voice to be heard. She never had an issue with another person talking over her. Hermione tried to find the trick to that, but it seemed to be an innate trait.

Hermione wondered how much of that was the Veela and how much was the charms mistress.

~*~

That Friday was the day Harry had his shift at the Wizengamot Administrative Services office. In forty-eight hours, she would have Draco Malfoy figured out.

Maybe.

She was beginning to doubt herself. Perhaps breaking into Draco’s mind wasn’t the best way to do this. She flinched at the thought of Draco ever finding out what she and Harry were about to do.

Was she becoming a Slytherin?

She shared a lift with Draco on Wednesday. He said good morning. He was so careful around her now, not looking at her, not touching her.

She watched him as other employees joined them in the lift, and he clenched his jaw, shifting to make space for them, but still finding a way not to touch her.

“You only have one more week left, yes?”

The woman in front of her managed to turn and look at her, but Draco still could not.

“Yes. Next Friday is my last day.”

The lift stopped for several people to hop off.

“That’s exciting,” she said. “Is everything going swimmingly? With the consulting group?”

He swallowed, staring intently at the back of a bald man’s head. “So far, so good. We’re on schedule to launch January 1st.”

“That’s wonderful. Congratulations.”

The lift stopped on Level 4. She turned over her shoulder as she exited. “Have a great day.” She watched as Draco eyes flickered to her, wary and curious. He nodded. And the gates closed.

Oh, yeah. She was *so* doing this.

~*~

Harry outlined his plan in perfect detail. Hermione was shocked.

Hermione would come upstairs to Level 2 after lunch. She would make sure to be seen by several people, like Katie Bell, Anthony Goldstein, so that if something happened, her presence could be explained. She would wait for Harry in the small empty office just to the left of the lifts.

When Harry took his fifteen-minute break at 2:15PM, he would come and meet her. She would put on the Invisibility Cloak, and they would return together to his post. At 3PM, Rudolf Montgomery, Harry’s assigned partner that day, would take his afternoon smoke break.

The plan went off perfectly. She had a minor heart attack trying to get from the small office in front of the lifts to the tucked away Admin office though. Harry bumped into Draco on their route back, and she flattened herself against the wall.

They exchanged pleasantries, and Draco asked about a file Harry was working on. Hermione found it quite strange how the two of them now communicated. When Draco walked away, Harry turned to where he supposed her to be.

“All good?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Harry led her to a large door at the end of the main concourse of cubicles. He held it wide so she could scurry through first. He made sure it locked behind him and led her down a

corridor that hadn't seen much upkeep. They passed a few empty offices, the candles becoming more spread out the further they went. Less light.

"Just like the good old days, right 'Mione?"

They turned a corner and at the end of the hallway next to a lantern stood Montgomery. Behind Montgomery was a black door labeled, Wizengamot Administration Services File Room.

Montgomery was a pimply twenty-five-year-old. Harry greeted him, and Montgomery asked him how his break was. They began chatting Quidditch, and Hermione leaned against a wall, trying not to tap her toes.

Montgomery finally took his break at 3:04PM. According to Harry, his smoke breaks lasted fifteen to twenty minutes, but he was trying to quit. There was no telling how long his break would be if he decided not to have a cigarette. And it was raining outside.

Harry waited for Montgomery's shoes to stop echoing off the stone hallway. Hermione was sure she heard the wood door open and close, but Harry waited ten seconds more.

He turned to the black door and began reciting several unlocking spells. He spoke the password and the door swung open.

Hermione's heart was racing. Harry lead her through, leaving the door open.

It was a small dark room, decorated like the Department of Mysteries. Black tiles and low lighting. He pointed to a cabinet in the corner of the room, waving his wand. A Pensieve appeared from the bottom shelf.

Hermione threw off the Invisibility cloak.

"You have ten minutes. Fifteen at *most*," Harry warned, before closing the door.

She turned to the cabinet containing current memories under review. She opened the door and found it was enchanted, growing to contain thousands of vials. She would waste her ten minutes just searching!

"Draco Malfoy." She hoped. And very slowly, about ten vials came forward from the depths of the cabinet. They hovered at the front.

She ran her fingers over the labels.

Antonin Dolohov
July 6, 1997
Malfoy Manor

Severus Snape and Lord Voldemort
Re: Alecto Carrow and Amycus Carrow
August 12, 1997
Malfoy Manor

Bellatrix Lestrange
December 23, 1997
Malfoy Manor

Her fingers were greedy to pour every memory in the basin and delve into Draco Malfoy's mind, but she knew she was there for a purpose. Her fingers stuttered over one in the middle.

Yaxley, Dolohov, Greyback
December 24, 1997
Granger Residence

She turned to the Pensieve, making sure it was clear of other memories. She unstopped the vial, dripped the memory in, and lowered her head to the surface without another thought.

She landed in front of her house at dusk. She could hear the Walters' sprinklers to her right. To her left, four masked Death Eaters, all staring at the front of the house.

She looked down. Next to her a white hand clutched a hawthorn wand.

Even though she knew the four men would not find her parents, even though she knew how this story ended, even though she knew they couldn't hurt her, Hermione felt the terror flowing through her.

On a silent cue that Hermione did not understand, the four men moved. Draco brought up the rear, possibly because of his status and age. Hermione figured that Fenrir Greyback was third in line from the snarling she could hear. She distinguished Dolohov and Yaxley by their heights. Yaxley was first, then Dolohov.

Yaxley unlocked the door with his wand. Hermione thought there would have been more of a performance about it. It was a simple *Alohomora*, not blowing the door off the hinges. The door crept open and Yaxley moved through it slowly.

Hermione didn't understand. They were here to kill two Muggles. There were four Death Eaters here, and they were all ready for a fight. The label on the memory said December 24. Did they expect to find her there, visiting for Christmas? She and Harry were in Godric's Hollow…

She stepped through the threshold after Draco, listening to his breathing. It was just as she had found it when she'd returned – empty.

"Fuck!" Dolohov broke the silence, removing his mask. And then they sprang into action. Yaxley took the route into the kitchen, and Dolohov reluctantly followed. Greyback was sniffing the air in the entryway, but Draco pushed to the left, into the family room and ran for the stairs.

She wanted to wait, wanted to find out what happened to the wall above the fireplace, but knew she had to follow Draco. Follow the blood.

He removed his mask as he sprinted up the stairs – two at a time, like Ron used to do. Her short legs brought her halfway as he stopped at the top. She could hear Greyback behind her, following Draco.

Draco moved left, breathing hard, then turned abruptly as she reached the top of the stairs and she almost toppled herself to move out of his way as he choose right instead. Right, towards her childhood bedroom.

She followed him, and looked over her shoulder as Greyback reached the top of the stairs and turned left, toward her parents' room and the bathroom.

She was breathing hard, afraid for what she'd find, but knowing they'd find nothing.

Draco burst through the door. And she followed him inside. He stepped in, footsteps echoing off the empty room. She could hear Greyback entering her parents' room down the hall, and Dolohov and Yaxley opening cupboards and closets downstairs.

Draco spun around, and inadvertently faced her. Eyes wide, taking in the bookcases that were built into the closet – the reason this room was hers. His chest heaved for air.

And suddenly his eyes closed, his brows pinched, and he was doubling over, hands braced on his knees, catching his breath.

She watched him. Barely able to stand in her empty childhood bedroom, taking a moment to himself, unaware he was being watched.

He stood tall, bringing the heels of his hands to his eyes, pressing, breathing. She'd never seen him like this. And she wondered if this is what Harry witnessed in Moaning Myrtle's Bathroom.

He brought his hands away from his face, eyes still closed. He breathed in, slowly. He breathed out, opening his eyes, and he was transformed. She found the face that looked at her over Cornerstone's counter, asking her why she worked there and not Flourish and Blotts. The face that handed her a Butterbeer, sat down next to her, and almost explained to her why she was called the Golden Girl. The face that asked about her date with Rolf Scamander, that watched Aiden escort her off the lifts on his first day, that examined her as she yelled at an elevator full of people that she was not engaged to Ron Weasley. The face she couldn't decipher.

"All clear up here." His voice was smooth as he called downstairs. He turned to exit her bedroom and Fenrir Greyback was in the doorway. She gasped at the intrusion.

"This one was hers, yeah?" The smile on Greyback's face curdled her blood.

"Possibly." Draco replied. He tried to push past Greyback.

"Pity her scent isn't still here." He sniffed at the air. "I'm sure she's sweet. And ripe."

Hermione felt tears of horror spring to her eyes, and had to remind herself that Greyback was dead. She watched as Draco's left eye twitched, and then he continued past Greyback and

down the stairs.

As Greyback followed she hurried around him to catch up to Draco. Yaxley and Dolohov were in the living room.

“Nothing down here.”

“No scent of anyone. Must have been several months.” Greyback’s voice from behind her.

“Malfoy,” Yaxley said, and Draco looked up at him. “Give me your arm.”

Draco looked confused, but stepped forward, rolling up the sleeve of his left arm. The Dark Mark. Hermione had never seen it before on him. Yaxley laughed.

“Not that arm.” Yaxley grabbed Draco’s right arm and slit it open. Draco grunted in pain.

“What the fuck?” He pulled his arm back. “You dare spill Malfoy blood?” *There* was the Draco she recognized from school.

Yaxley sneered at him. “Don’t mean as much as it used to, I hear.” Yaxley pointed his wand at Draco’s arm, then turned to the wall above her fireplace. She watched as the words appeared. When Yaxley finished, Dolohov laughed.

“Let’s go,” Yaxley ordered. Fenrir followed him out.

Dolohov stopped at Draco’s side as he used his wand to heal Yaxley’s cut.

“That’s what you get for volunteering, whelp.” Dolohov spit on the carpet at Draco’s feet. Draco stood still and glared at him. Dolohov exited, and Hermione watched Draco take one last look at the wall, dripping with his blood. He turned and she followed him out.

The other three had Apparated away. Mr. Walters was moving his sprinkler. He gave Draco a strange look before returning inside. Draco glanced up and down the street, then turned back to her house, casting the Muggle-Repelling Charm.

He Disapparated, and she was pulled out, back into the small storeroom.

She checked her timepiece, shaking. She had only been inside his memory for eight minutes. She sighed, relieved that she hadn’t taken up too much time.

She quickly retrieved Draco’s memory, poured it back into the vial, and recapped it. With shaking fingers, she replaced it in the cabinet, and before she could close the door, her eyes caught on another vial.

Malfoy Manor
March 30, 1998

Her hands stilled. The night they were captured. The night Bellatrix tortured her. The night Draco refused to identify them.

She looked back to the door. She had seven minutes. Maybe.

She snatched the vial, tipped the memory into the basin, and was inside Malfoy Manor within moments.

Draco sat in an armchair in the drawing room, reading a book. He was thinner, gaunt around the eyes. Lucius sat opposite him in another armchair.

Scuffling in the hallway. The hallway that Hermione had just run through weeks before. Narcissa entered, leading Greyback and Scabior, a band of prisoners moving slowly behind them.

Yes. This was the moment.

“What is this?” Lucius stood.

Hermione watched as Narcissa, moved toward Draco, asking him to identify them. Narcissa was thin, too. She moved quickly, and with less grace than Hermione knew her to have. Her voice was less silky, and her hands twisted around each other as she stood. Perhaps Lucius Malfoy’s list of qualities did not apply to War.

“I can’t – I can’t be sure.” Draco’s voice was pinched. Hermione saw herself struggle against the binds, her hair wild. And Draco’s eyes landed on the back of her head. He looked away quickly.

She watched as Lucius and Greyback squabbled about who would get the glory of finding Harry Potter, and then Lucius brought Draco back down to examine Harry’s face.

“I don’t know.” Draco moved away from the prisoners and to Narcissa at the fireplace.

Narcissa was talking about the wand found on Harry, and then Greyback growled, “What about the Mudblood, then?”

The snatchers turned the group of prisoners around, and she found herself at the center of attention. Hermione saw the fear on her own face and had to look away.

Narcissa stepped forward, anticipation, identifying Hermione from the paper. Hermione felt betrayed somehow, even though she knew this is what had happened. She watched as Narcissa turned to Draco.

“Look, Draco, isn’t it the Granger girl?”

Draco faced the fireplace. His back to the room. He mumbled, “I… maybe… yeah.”

Hermione stepped toward him, trying to look at his face. It was neutral, looking into the fire. She looked up and Narcissa was watching him, hand still outstretched, gesturing toward the prisoners. Hermione watched as Narcissa’s eyes scanned her son, and she brought her hand down. Narcissa stepped closer to him, and Hermione finally recognized her. Draco’s mother had returned.

"—Draco, look at him," Lucius was yelling. "Isn't it Arthur Weasley's son – what's his name?"

"Yeah. It could be." Hermione watched him. Narcissa stepped closer to him, and turned her eyes on the prisoners. Narcissa opened her lips to speak to Draco, and before she could, a voice turned Hermione's veins to ice.

"What is this? What's happened, Cissy?"

This was a mistake. She should exit the memory now. She'd seen what she'd wanted to see. Her time was surely almost up.

Bellatrix Lestrange slithered into the drawing room. Hermione stood frozen as Lucius and she bickered about who was going to call Voldemort. Draco still faced the fire at her side.

Bellatrix had just noticed the sword. She was stunning the Snatchers. Hermione knew what came next. She turned, about to exit, to return to the room with the Pensieve, when she noticed that Draco was shaking. Narcissa placed a hand on his shoulder and he flinched.

"Draco, move this scum outside," Bellatrix said, gesturing to the immobilized bodies of the Snatchers. "If you haven't got the guts to finish them, then leave them in the courtyard for me."

Draco started to obey, but Narcissa steadied him. "Don't you dare speak to Draco like—"

"Be quiet!" Bellatrix screamed. "The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!"

Draco had turned around when his aunt had summoned him. He still stood by the fire, but he now faced the room. The story was now reaching a part that she didn't really care to relive, but she couldn't take her eyes off of Draco. His eyes flitted about the room, not landing on anything in particular.

She heard Bellatrix order Greyback to take the boys downstairs. She turned to see herself standing in the center of the drawing room, being circled by Bellatrix. There was something slightly satisfying about watching this outside of her own body, like she could pretend it was someone else. Lucius had come to stand next to Narcissa near the fireplace, like he was giving Bellatrix space. Hermione stood with all three Malfoys near the fireplace, thinking what an odd visual it must present.

"*Crucio!*"

She watched as Narcissa jumped and nearly brought her hands to her chest, before returning to her original position. Lucius pursed his lips. Draco's eye twitched, but he did nothing.

She was screaming. She didn't look at herself, but she knew she had dropped to her knees.

Bellatrix growled at her, asking about the sword. She heard her own voice begging. Then the electricity of the Cruciatus Curse again and her voice screaming.

Narcissa swallowed. The curse lasted longer this time. Lucius looked down, displeased. She continued screaming.

A gasp to her right, and Hermione turned to find Draco turning around, facing the fireplace again. He brought his hand up to the mantle to steady himself. His eyes closed, gasping for breath. His shoulders shook as he brought his other hand to his stomach. Eyes pinched closed, like before.

She watched as Narcissa stepped in to him. She moved slowly, afraid of being seen, and whispered, “What would Severus say?” Her voice was gentle, and her hand was on his shoulder, squeezing.

Hermione watched as Draco took a deep breath, released it, and opened his eyes. She watched his wall build, and recognized it this time as Occlumency. Draco turned back around and faced her limp body on the floor, as his aunt dropped to her knees, pulling her knife.

She watched as he remained immobile as she screamed again, this time due to the knife cutting into her arm.

Hermione looked to Narcissa, who had cast her eyes down, then past her to Lucius, watching Draco. He scrutinized his son, looking between Draco and her body on the floor. He had seen him break seconds ago. Lucius sighed, and brought his hand up to his brow, as if of all the people in this room, his problems were the heaviest.

The room started spinning. She was being tugged back.

The Admin Office closet swam back before her. Harry was there.

“Hermione. Time’s up!” He was quickly gathering the silvery memory, dropping it back in the vial. She stood watching him, breathing hard. She could still hear her voice screaming and the echo of a gasp to her right. Harry looked back at her.

“Did it work? Did you get your answer?”

She turned to him, looking in his green eyes. She shook her head, trying to put it all together.

“He would have saved me.”

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! Enjoy!

She took a breath. The hard covers of the books dug into her palms, and she opened her eyes, staring at the wooden door to the hospital wing.

She should go back. Sit in the common room and just forget she ever had such a silly idea.

Footsteps from down the hall. She would look so foolish standing outside the infirmary clutching books to her chest. She quickly stepped inside and let the door shut behind her.

The mint green curtains were drawn on several beds, and Madam Pomfrey's office light was on. Someone was moaning at the end of the row, and Hermione peeked to find a first year holding his arm, eyes shut tight. She continued down the row, checking left and right. And in the fourth bed on the right, she found him.

His blonde hair was plastered down on his forehead, wet with sweat. His cheeks were pink with fever, and his brows were drawn together, but he was asleep. Relief flooded her veins, now that she wouldn't have to speak with him, to see his snarl and hear his taunts.

She stepped closer and saw that under the thin sheet pulled up to his chest, his pajama shirt was unbuttoned and open, and an angry red crack started just left of the dip in his collarbone, zagging down and disappearing under the sheet.

She gasped, and the sound ricocheted around the infirmary, dancing with the first year's moans. Pressing her lips together to keep silent, she reached and pulled the sheet down slowly. The line crossed his chest, cutting the other direction just under his heart, and sliced down across his belly. It glistened with the salve Pomfrey had slathered on him. Hermione's lip trembled.

“Come to finish the job, Miss Granger?”

She spun, dropping the sheet, and almost dropping the books. Severus Snape hovered at the foot of the bed, robes pulled tight as he crossed his arms. His black eyes studied her.

“I—I’m sorry. I was just… just delivering Malfoy’s notes.” He raised a brow at her, so she continued rambling. “He missed classes, and I know he’s been falling behind, so I- I wanted to drop off a summary of the lessons, and anything in particular the professors said –“

“If you were assigned the task of taking notes for Mr. Malfoy, then what did Miss Parkinson bring by after classes today?” He nodded to a stack of papers and books on Malfoy’s side table. Hermione blushed.

“Doodles and love notes, I’m sure.” She refrained from sneering, and looked up into his dark features. “But if you, Malfoy’s professor, would prefer ***Pansy Parkinson’s*** *notes to mine, then I’m sure you believe them to be complete, and my notes – unnecessary.”*

Snape’s mouth twisted, and his hand shot out, requesting her papers. She blinked and handed over the book and notes. He flipped through her notes, examining them, and suddenly Draco’s body seized. His back bowed and his hands pulled into fists. His legs kicked. Snape did nothing, but flipped a page.

“Is… is he going to be alright, Professor?”

Snape snapped closed the book and frowned at her. “Oh, how I love Gryffindor guilt.” He turned to watch Draco as he whined, still asleep. “Yes. The counter-curse will need a few days to work its way through him. The dittany will stop most the scarring.”

She watched as Draco’s fingers clawed at the sheets, but his hands stayed at his sides. His wrists must be spelled to stick to the bed, she realized, and he must have been trying to claw at his wounds. His face scrunched in pain, and she itched to sit beside him and run her fingers across his tight face..

“Will that be all, Miss Granger?”

She jumped at the silky voice, and turned to find Snape dissecting her. Harry told her what it felt like when he entered your mind, so Hermione knew it was not Legilimency.

“Yes,” she said, and turned to pass him.

“Unless you would like me to give Mr. Malfoy a message –?”

“No. I – thank you. I will head back to Gryffindor tower.” She hurried to the door and flew through it, muttering to herself about foolish ideas.

~*~

"He would have saved me."

Harry stared at her blankly. "Okay..." He grabbed her elbow and guided her out of the room. "I don't really know what that means, but we have to go." He threw the cloak over her head and grabbed her invisible arm.

Harry led her out. She could hear her shoes clapping, feel her legs working, but she wasn't sure her brain was firing. She was still hearing the screaming and the gasp.

Harry locked the door with a combination of spells she didn't recognize. Her pulse racing. Footsteps down the hallway, and she gathered herself enough to cast *Silencio* on her feet. Harry leaned in to where he supposed her to be standing.

"Leave when it's safe. I'll come by later."

And Montgomery rounded the corner, tugging at his sleeves. "All good here?"

"Yep. Boring as usual."

The tang of stale cigarettes filled the hallway, and once Montgomery reached them, she slipped past, continuing through the maze she'd memorized.

She reached the main concourse of Level 2, and wound her way through the cubicles. She was having trouble catching her breath and wanted so badly to duck into an empty cube and take off the cloak, but she knew she couldn’t just appear out of nowhere.

She zipped past Katie Bell's cube as she munched on a snack, and slowed as she passed the bottleneck near the conference room. The door was open.

Draco sat at the conference table. His back to the door. She stepped in, moving around the table to see him, creeping by his right shoulder and to the other side. His lips were turned down as he studied what looked to be a map.

He scratched his jaw.

She thought of him in her house. On the top of the stairs, he’d headed left first, then chose right. How had he known which room was hers?

She thought of him in her bedroom, bursting through the door, even though the house was empty. What did he hope to find? Or *not* find?

She thought of him in front of his fireplace, shaking, rebuilding his wall after it shattered.

She watched him now as he breathed deeply at the conference room table, sighing. His hair had fallen across his forehead and she wanted so badly to push it back for him.

She had tried to solve the enigma that was Draco Malfoy. And he felt as foreign to her as before.

In response, his eyes snapped up. He turned over his shoulder and looked at the door. He narrowed his eyes, brain working, listening.

After thirty seconds, he stood, and she held her breath. He moved slowly to the door, and she crept further from him. She watched as he poked his head out of the doorway, looking left, then right. He came back in, staring at the ground, thinking.

He looked up at her. She swore he did. But then his eyes glazed over her spot on the wall and he took a breath. He looked out the door again, a frown in his eyes.

Footsteps. “Afternoon, Malfoy!” Robards’ jolly voice.

She watched as Draco smiled softly. “Afternoon, sir. Is Granger up here?”

Hermione gasped, and slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Granger? Er, no I don’t think so. Did you need her?” Robards’ form appeared in the doorway.

“No, no, that’s fine. I just thought I’d seen her.”

How. What?

“I can call her up. Have…” Robards lowered his voice. “Have things resolved themselves with you two?”

“Er, no. It’s still best if we don’t work together. Thank you.”

Hermione blinked. She frowned at the ground. That would explain why she hadn’t been summoned up for almost two weeks. Draco didn’t want to work with her after the incident.

Robards bid him a good day. Draco stood in the doorway, eyes glazing. He inhaled again, looked out the door, cracked his neck, and returned to his chair.

She slipped out of the room, racing for the small office to the left of the elevators. She whipped the cloak off of her, gasping for air. She tilted her head toward her body, sniffing. She didn’t wear a perfume. And she didn’t have body odor – thank god.

The only thing she could smell was her hair. Her shampoo.

He would have saved her, *and* he recognized the scent of her hair.

Hermione sat down before she passed out.

~*~

She decided to take down the Wall that night.

It was time. She’d gotten the answers she was looking for when she first put up the Wall. She was just pulling down the newspaper clipping from her birthday – Draco visiting Lucius in Azkaban – when Ginny came home.

She burst into her bedroom, eyes wide with joy and curiosity, and then she deflated. Hermione nodded to her in greeting, and Ginny watched as Hermione placed the newspaper clipping back in her chest.

She didn't know what to say to her.

I was wrong. About everything.

I feel so wicked and guilty, having broken into his mind, into his heart.

I think Draco Malfoy might have cared for me.

I just watched myself be tortured. I can still hear myself scream.

She didn't know where to start.

Ginny took her in and looked to the Wall, now half bare. She frowned at the floor and moved to the other side, to the most recent articles and notes, and began taking them down, one-by-one, in silence until they met in the middle.

~*~

She'd finally began speaking to Ginny once the articles were taken down. There were handwritten notes that still needed to be vanished, like a mocking wallpaper. After she'd taken her through both memories, Ginny stared at her with wide eyes.

"He lied to you." Her voice was soft, like she was experiencing something grand.

"Which time?" Hermione laughed.

"All of the times."

Hermione looked at her, and Ginny was examining the empty wall again. Ginny stood, walking to the spot on the timeline where Hermione had added the number 35,000 in ink. Ginny traced the number with her fingers. Hermione watched as Ginny's eyes moved backwards. She passed the door, moving to the wall on the left and tracing her way back through the scribbled events of the war. She passed the Battle of Hogwarts, passed Malfoy Manor, and landed on Christmas Eve – 1997.

"He volunteered?" Ginny's eyes on the date.

"That's what Dolohov said."

"*That's* what he didn't want you to know."

Hermione looked to her. Ginny was creating her own timeline in her head. She would look at the Wall then stare at the ground, eyes moving, then back up to the Wall. Ginny spun and turned to her, eyes sparkling.

"So…. He loves you."

Hermione's heart fluttered before she beat it back into its cage.

"He… he was *relieved* that the house was empty. Whether or not that means that he cared about the inhabitants, or that he was glad there was to be no killing that day—"

"The inhabitants? Granger!" Ginny yelled. "He ran straight for your bedroom! Is that not proof enough for you?"

"It's—it's, of course, a possibility! But maybe—"

Ginny put up her hand. "No. No maybes. I won't let you talk yourself out of this." Ginny joined her on the bed, grabbing her hand. "Hermione. Lucius Malfoy was right." Ginny raised a brow and blinked, as if the sentence had pained her. "Draco went to his pure-blood grandmother, asking for 35,000 galleons as a *contingency* plan to save a Muggle-born girl that he wasn't even dating." Ginny sat back, eyes wide. "Merlin, what balls he has."

Hermione's nose wrinkled at her expression, and she stood, beginning to pace.

"I… I understand what you're getting at Gin. I can concede that… that it *seems* as if Lucius Malfoy was correct and that Draco had… some sort of feelings for me." She turned to the redhead. "But that was then. And who knows what he's feeling now."

Ginny groaned and jumped off the bed, opening the chest with the articles they'd just taken off the wall. She snatched one up and held it in front of Hermione's face.

"*I* do! *I* know what he's feeling now!"

Hermione took in the article from their lunch date at Fortescue's. Draco's hand coming up to guide her as she walked across the street. Draco's eyes on her as she and Narcissa talked. Draco's easy smile and flashing eyes as he dropped her back off at the front door of Cornerstone Books. It seemed like a lifetime ago. How would she ever get back to the ease of that moment?

"But now he's dating someone. *Multiple* someones!" Hermione walked around her bed to place the Fortescue's article back in her chest.

"Well, then go tell him you'd like your name to be added to the waitlist!" Ginny jumped on Hermione's bed, standing tall. It reminded her so much of their last year of Hogwarts that she almost smiled.

A *crackle* and *whoosh* from the fireplace. Harry's voice called out a hello.

"Make some tea, Potter!" Ginny yelled to him. "And open some wine! We have some planning to do."

"Oh, bollocks," Harry muttered from the living room.

Hermione spent the next half hour filling Harry in on the memories. Well, Ginny did most of the talking, putting her own spin on things. Hermione sat at the little table in the dining area, drinking a glass of wine that Ginny had forced upon her.

Harry quietly sipped his tea throughout. Hermione could see the strain on his face, the tightness of his lips as the events of the War were recounted for him. Ginny didn't notice as she charged on, painting new pictures for him. Hermione didn't blame her. She wasn't there. She wasn't in Godric's Hollow on the night Draco and the Death Eaters had tried capturing them at her parents' house. She wasn't at Malfoy Manor, or on the beach. She didn't have the image of Dobby's grave imprinted on her memories like Harry and Hermione did.

"So the task now," Ginny said, and Hermione was pulled from her thoughts, "is to get these two on the same page!"

"Isn't he dating that Bulgarian girl?" Harry said, picking up his teacup.

"Yes," Hermione said. "And she's wonderful."

"Alright, enough of that." Ginny poured her more wine. "Katya Whatever doesn't matter. Harry," she rounded on him. "As a bloke… is it possible to date one girl but be in love with another?" Ginny placed her hands on her hips.

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, eyes landing on Ginny. "I feel like this is a trap."

"It's not. Answer the damn question, Potter. I know you love me."

"I… Well, yes. It's a rotten thing to do, though."

Ginny smiled brightly and said, "And Draco Malfoy is a rotten person, so great! There it is!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and drank deeply from her glass. She thought, perhaps in the future, she would try to deal with her romantic entanglements without involving everyone.

"So," Ginny continued. "Malfoy wants Hermione. Hermione wants Malfoy. I should think the next steps are quite easy."

"Well…" Harry murmured. They looked at him.

"'Well' what?" Ginny demanded.

Harry looked like he wished he hadn't spoken. "Well… what was the last conversation the two of you had?"

Hermione blinked. "I… I saw him in the elevators on Thursday. I asked him about his business and told him to have a good day."

"And before that?" Harry winced. Hermione was confused.

"It was the Marcus Flint thing, yeah?" Ginny said, sitting down at the table. "Where he responded to her throwing herself at him!"

"Yes, but…" Harry took a breath. She wished he would just out with it. "Did you not also accuse him of drugging you to… take advantage of you?"

“But she apologized for that. They mended it.” Ginny shook her head in frustration. Hermione looked back and forth between the two of them as they discussed her.

“Alright, but it still happened. He knows you think him capable of it.”

She felt a rock in her stomach. “No, that’s… I mean –“ she started.

“Well, let’s disregard that because you ‘mended’ it.” Harry stood. Ginny glared at him using her words against her. “And what happened before all that?”

“I accused him of splashing blood on my parents’ walls.” She looked to the table, resigning herself to what Harry was getting at.

“No, no. He didn’t do the splashing,” Ginny said. “*And* we now know that’s not what really was happening—“

“Yes, but *Malfoy* doesn’t know that she knows that, because *that* would ruin the perfect little secret mission Hermione and I just went on—“

“But what does it matter?! She should just bring it up again and tell him that she doesn’t believe he would have hurt her or her parents if he found—“

“She can try!” Harry flung his arms out to the sides. “But it won’t help that she’s already accused him of it, already thinks him capable—“

“I get it, Harry.” Hermione frowned at her hands. Harry was right. And it was awful.

“And let’s not forget,” Harry started, softer, “what happened before that.”

Hermione looked up at him.

“What?” Ginny said. “Before that was Lucius Malfoy.”

“Before that,” Hermione said, feeling hopelessness fill her chest, “I told his mother that I would never marry him.”

Ginny opened her mouth to argue, then shut it. She said, “Maybe Narcissa didn’t tell him that part?”

Hermione smiled sadly.

“Now, I’m not Draco Malfoy,” Harry said. “Thank Merlin,” he muttered. “I’m not a pure-blood, Slytherin, pain-in-the-ass. But as a *bloke*…” Harry took a breath and caught her eyes. “I would assume that ship had sailed.”

Hermione nodded at her hands, feeling a tightness in her chest.

“Well, then. We’ll need to turn that ship back around!” Ginny said quite proudly, clearly not understanding the Muggle phrasing.

~*~

How to make Draco Malfoy fall in love with her again. She tapped her quill against the ledger book. This would be so much easier if only she could figure out how she'd managed it the first time.

She leaned against the counter at Cornerstone, watching the hag move listlessly through the stacks. She started doodling a list of ideas an hour ago. *Approach Robards for more projects. Write to Narcissa Malfoy. Kidnapping.*

She glanced at the letter she had begun drafting to him. The second book in the new Lance Gainsworth series would be released to Cornerstone in May. The pre-order list usually started three months before a book was to be released, so writing to him *six* months before, asking if he'd like to be placed on the pre-order list was a bit of a stretch.

No, she would need to find a casual way to maintain their relationship, especially since his last day at the Ministry was this coming Friday. She had no relationship with him outside of the office any longer, so she would need to do something this week, something to keep his interest. Casually.

She raised her gaze out the windows at the cobblestone streets outside, and had to shake herself when she saw Draco Malfoy on the street, taking a deep breath before reaching for the door handle. Had she conjured him?

She looked down quickly, finding her half-finished letter to him on the counter. She grabbed it up and crumpled it, tossing it into the rubbish bin and pretending to close the ledger book and store it when she looked up. Casually.

"Good afternoon." She let her eyes land on him as he ascended the steps to the main landing. She faked surprise. "Oh, hello."

"Granger." He nodded in greeting, and she shivered at the memory of *Granger* across her ear.

"Did you... did you have a book on reserve?" She turned to the reserved shelf, knowing full well there was no book under Malfoy or Black.

"Er, no," he said. She turned back to him, keeping her face as open as possible. "I was... maybe just going to browse."

He was wearing a satchel bag across his chest, looking ever the part of a Muggle college professor. Hermione couldn't decide whether she wanted to laugh or swoon.

"Wonderful." She felt her heart beating in her fingertips. He was here. And she was anxious to keep him. "There's actually… um…" She moved around the counter toward the seating area and stacks on the left. "Quite a few new titles since you were here last."

She led the way to the fiction section, feeling him follow her. Merlin, she had no idea what she was doing.

“There’s a new novel out, based loosely on a Muggle book from the 1980s.” She stopped at the shelf and tapped the spine. “Dystopian future, marriage law, regulations on bearing children.” She glanced up at him and he was watching her face. “In my opinion the Muggle book is better, but no one’s heard of it here, so…”

She trailed off and shrugged, moving down the shelves. There were several people milling in the fiction section and a young witch sitting in one of the armchairs was studying the two of them. Hermione ran her fingers over a few spines and saw him follow her.

“And here. Phineas Bourne has tried his hand at *fiction*, frighteningly enough. I haven’t had the stomach to sit through it, but Morty told me it’s quite a gruesome horror novel, if you’re into that…”

She bit her lip, thinking how foolish she must look, leading him through the shop as if he’d never been in a bookstore before. No other person reading quietly had received a private tour of the new releases.

She was in too deep. She should present him with one more book and then leave him to it. She couldn’t even look at him, afraid to find that he’d seen right through her.

“The last one I wanted to show you…er…” She turned a corner and thankfully found an empty row. She was desperate to get out of sight of the young witch who knew exactly what she was doing. “Here.” She retrieved a book from the bottom shelf. “A new biography on Chadwick Boot. I’ve written to Terry Boot to see if this author had any sort of claim to the information he provides, but I’m still waiting for his response.”

She pulled her eyes from the cover. His gaze was on the book. He looked up at her, a smirk hiding behind his lips.

“I’ll take all three.”

She swallowed, watching the way his eyes changed colors. “Really? Er… Wonderful.” She smiled, trying to maintain her sense of professionalism. “I – I mean… I didn’t mean to force these on you.” She laughed, and the sound was very odd. “You are welcome to browse, of course.”

“No, no,” he said, plucking the biography from her shaking fingers. “If Hermione Granger recommends a new book to read, then I’d be a fool not to listen to her.”

Hermione watched him flip the biography over, and read the back of it. She didn’t remember the last time he’d spoken her first name.

“I’ll… I’ll grab the others and meet you at the counter then.” She pushed past him, her hips brushing against his thighs in the small space. She grabbed the two other books she had recommended, ignoring the way the young witch grinned at the pages of her book.

She headed to the counter and focused on her breathing. She pulled the ledger and began writing as she heard him approach.

"I actually wanted to ask you for something," he said.

She looked up at him. His eyes flickered to the counter. She held her breath as her pulse skipped and her mind raced.

“Anything.”

Oh, god. Oh, god, Hermione. Her voice had been light at least, and not darkened with lust or heavy with promise. What a stupid response.

He looked up at her again, face blank. Occlumency. He’d shut her out.

“You are acquainted with Quentin Margolis?”

That was not at all what she was expecting.

“The werewolf leader?” she said, and Draco nodded. “I suppose I am. He’s been in the office several times, and after the war he wanted me and Harry to introduce him to Teddy Lupin…” She was rambling. “Why do you ask?”

“I am hoping to take him on as a client. Well, him and his pack.” Draco scratched his jaw and looked away. “He’s been… unresponsive to the owls I’ve sent to him. And I’m beginning to think it’s my name, my reputation.” His jaw clenched. “My history with Greyback.”

Hermione saw the shame cross his brow before the image of Fenrir Greyback sniffing the air in her bedroom swam before her eyes.

“I see.” She didn’t. “Well, Quentin spends very little time away from the pack. It’s possible your letters haven’t been received?”

“Oh, they have.” Draco grinned tightly. “’Unresponsive’ was the nice way of saying it, but he’s let me know that he has no interest in meeting me.”

She nodded, twirling her quill.

"It might be a matter of money. The community may not be able to afford your services. Werewolves have a hard time earning and keeping employment –"

"That's what we're fighting for. Equal rights for werewolves. Anti-discrimination laws."

Her breath left her in puff. “Anti-discrimination laws?” She met his eyes and knew her own were wide. The fight for werewolf rights was a long-time coming, and Kingsley had told her that it was under review for upcoming hearings. But if someone like Draco Malfoy and his consulting group was leading the charge… with real legal counsel…

His eyes roved over her face, and then he looked down at the counter, as if he were embarrassed.

“I just need an ‘in,’” Draco said. “A recommendation.”

“Of course.” She was breathless. “I’ll write to Quentin on your behalf.”

“You will?” His eyes burned her. She nodded. “I have… here…” He turned to his damned satchel bag and pulled from it a leather folio file. “Here is the proposal. If you’d like to familiarize yourself with it at all.”

She took it from him with greedy fingers, anxious to pour over the ideas and plans in it. “I’ll have it back to you on Monday.”

He nodded. “Thank you, Granger.”

Granger. Whispered against her ear.

She smiled and tucked the folio away, and continued writing out his purchase on the ledger. It was possible the only reason he was buying these three books was because he needed a favor from her. But Hermione didn’t have any qualms about that.

With her eyes still on the ledger she said, “Is your team taking you out for a celebration on your last day?”

“Er, no. I don’t think so.”

She looked up at him and brushed her hair away from her face. “That won’t do,” she said. “Harry and I will have to plan something then.”

His eyes flashed at her. She hadn’t seen them do that in forever. He’d dropped his guard.

“You… don’t have to.”

“Of course we do,” she said, grinning. “We’ll have to do something truly embarrassing, like print your face on a cake.”

He winced. “That must be a Muggle tradition.”

“Absolutely.” She laughed. Her heart was beating so fast, she felt like she was playing with fire. “We’ll do Friday after work? On your last day.” She was flying awfully close to the sun and she felt the need to slow down. “I’ll have Harry spread the word at Level 2. Bring Katya if you’d like.”

Like splashing cold water on herself.

“Or Noelle,” she grinned, strained. “Or whoever’s on rotation for Fridays.” She managed a small laugh as she placed his three books in a bag.

She couldn’t even look at him. She could tell he was watching her.

“You’ll have to tell me how the horror novel is. I don’t think I can get through it,” she said. She handed him the bag.

He took it from her and said, “Thank you. For writing to Quentin Margolis.”

She met his eyes. “Of course. Anything you need.”

He smirked, and she could feel the heat rising to her cheeks. “Careful, Granger,” he said, and she watched his eyes sparkle. “I may just take you up on that.”

The smile broke on her lips before she could stop it. She bit it back, knowing she looked quite the fool, pressing her lips together and blushing as he turned and strolled out of Cornerstone Books.

~*~

She floated through the rest of the day. She floated home. She floated into her bedroom and found two envelopes waiting for her on her bed. Ginny must have grabbed them from the owls that delivered.

One of them was an ivory envelope, with perfect, slanted cursive spelling *Miss Hermione Jean Granger*. The other just said *H.G.* How odd.

She opened the ivory envelope first, recognizing Narcissa Malfoy’s handwriting.

Dearest Hermione,

Narcissa and Draco Malfoy wish to cordially invite you to the annual Malfoy New Year’s Eve Gala, and official launch party for Malfoy Consulting Group.

There were several other slips of paper in the envelope such as an R.S.V.P. and instructions on how to arrive by Floo, but she was consumed by the “Dearest Hermione” bit.

She smiled at the delicate scrawl. Perhaps things were heading back to normal now. She and Draco were talking – flirting, even – and Narcissa was addressing her with endearments. She imagined arriving in a beautiful dress, getting her hair done, letting Ginny do her makeup, and letting Draco take her up on her offer of “anything he needs.”

She was still blushing, biting her lip, as she opened the other envelope, removing from it several pieces.

Her heart stopped and her body shook as she recognized the handwriting. An even scrawl she’d last seen on a scrap of paper against a metal table.

Miss Granger,

I have written to Madame Michele and am I quite shocked to find that she has no upcoming appointments with you.

I have written to Miss Truesdale, Madame Bernard, and Monsieur Dubois, and have found that you have made no attempts to schedule appointments for dance lessons, interior design lessons, or hosting classes.

It was my understanding that you were not romantically involved with my son, and if you chose to become involved, you recognized the qualities that we had agreed you would work

on.

As you have no intention of becoming an eligible candidate for my son, I'm afraid I will have to reevaluate my willingness to separate Draco's inheritance from his marital obligations. It's such a shame that this may affect Draco's business plans. I had hoped he would start anew and grow to be quite a leader in this world, but perhaps he is not ready.

Do not embarrass yourself any further by trying to deny it. I have seen the proof with my own two eyes, Miss Granger, and I must insist that you remove yourself from my son's world.

Lucius Malfoy

With shaking fingers, she set the letter down on her bed to find several photographs behind it. She watched as she threw herself into Draco's arms in a dirty alley, threading her fingers through his hair and pressing her lips against his neck. She flung that picture across the room and found the image of Draco pressing her against a brick wall as she sucked on his wrist.

She dropped the photos and stumbled to her bathroom, heaving.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Several chapters ago I dubbed one chapter the longest yet. That was a joke in comparison this one. :)
>
> See end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lucius Malfoy was very talented.

Hermione thought this while staring out the window of her bedroom. It had begun to rain.

She had finished her gagging and crying, and had stormed back into her bedroom, lights flickering with magic.

She would not put up with this, she had thought. She would not be manipulated like a common school girl. She would write back to Lucius Malfoy, detailing that she had no intention of becoming someone good enough for his son. She and Draco were to start courting, and they would get married – NOT in the Malfoy Gardens, thank you very much – and they would have children and *none of them* would be blonde because it was a *recessive damn trait, Lucius*. And she would ensure that not a single brunette Malfoy cub had any idea how to hold a spoon or balance a checkbook, or ballroom dance, or any of it!

She had paced to her purse, rummaging for a quill and parchment. And that was when she found it.

A leather folio detailing how Draco Malfoy was going to change the world.

She sat on her bed now, staring out the window, the folio open on her lap. She had devoured the whole thing, front to back, and had run her fingers over his delicate handwriting. He had

detailed everything, clearly having done his research on the history of werewolves, the current problems, and the failed solutions.

The fifth tab in the leather folder contained a legal analysis. He had found flaws in the existing laws that governed werewolf regulations. He outlined how Malfoy Consulting Group would target these flaws in an aggressive attack against the Wizengamot.

The seventh tab contained hypotheses about how testimony from the werewolf community could strengthen the argument, and how Harry Potter himself could step forward to defend Remus Lupin and his excellence in teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. Draco had somehow been informed that Harry learned to produce a Patronus from Remus when he was thirteen, and he planned to use that to his advantage as well.

The final tab was filled with personal notes. She was shocked to see scribbles and bullet-point ideas in his handwriting. Shocked that he would let her see them. One of the ideas was an unformed thought regarding the new Muggle-Born Integration Laws being evaluated by the Wizengamot this spring. These laws would require that a percentage of every private business's staff be Muggle-born, and Draco was clearly in the middle of a thought regarding similar laws that could apply to werewolves. She read through his scratches and scribbles and found the reasoning for leaving this idea out of the full presentation:

Would this be exclusive to werewolves? Or would the other species/creatures want this applied to them – if we represented.

Hermione had stared into space for several moments, imagining other species getting equal representation in the Wizengamot… *if we represented.*

It was all brilliant. *He* was brilliant. And she decided she would do everything in her power to get him what he wanted.

She would write an outstanding letter to Quentin Margolis. She would convince him of the importance of Malfoy Consulting Group, and give her full-hearted support to Draco Malfoy.

She would write to Lucius Malfoy. She would calmly explain that the pictures in question were part of a misunderstanding, a freak incident. She would pledge to stay away from Draco unless a social gathering or business venture called for it. She would inform him of her invitation to Narcissa's New Year's Eve Gala so that there would be no misunderstanding, and let him know she intended on going.

If this was not sufficient for him – Hermione brushed a tear away from her face – she would offer to begin her courses with Madame Michele in January. She would beg him to reconsider withholding the inheritance.

Hermione watched as a drop of rain wound its way down the outside of her window, joining with others and zooming past.

Anything you need.

~*~

She used Katie Bell on Monday to deliver the folio back to him. She told Katie to wait until he left his desk, and then place it on his chair. She'd included a copy of the letter she'd written to Quentin Margolis in the front pocket.

She told Harry he needed to organize an after-work celebration on Friday for Draco. Harry looked quite confused as to how to go about doing that, so she enlisted Katie Bell's help with that as well.

That Monday Witch Weekly printed, with a picture of Draco Malfoy smirking on the cover. *Most Charming Smile!* Hermione laughed. She didn't think anyone had graced the cover without actually smiling.

The article went on, interviewing Draco on all manner of insipid subjects. What his favorite date restaurant was, what he looked for in a woman, what a woman should wear on a first date.

Hermione felt like she'd lost two O.W.L.s just by reading it.

The lifts brought them together on Wednesday at lunch time. She was so tired, staring at her shoes. She hadn't heard back from Lucius Malfoy yet, so she had no idea if this effort of not seeing him, not speaking to him, was even worth it.

She looked up as the lift stopped at Level 6 and the gates opened and revealed him. He was like fresh water. And she had been so parched. He caught sight of her and smiled.

She looked down, leaning against the back of the lift for support.

"Granger."

"Hello, how are you?"

"Well, thank you." He stepped in next to her, and as the lift shot to the side, she felt her hips brush his. "I heard back from Quentin Margolis."

She looked up at him. "And?"

"He's agreed to meet with me next week." He smirked down at her and she smiled up at him.

"That's wonderful news." She felt a blush slithering up her neck the longer she looked into his eyes. "I'm … I'm so happy for you."

"I can't thank you enough, Granger."

She felt the heat of him next to her and was so relieved when someone joined the lift at Level 5.

"I'm just glad you asked me. I'm very impressed by the whole proposal."

Proposal… Why wasn't there a better word.

“I hear there’s a party for me at a pub on Friday night,” Draco pressed his lips together, pretending to frown.

“Is there?” She asked innocently. “Perhaps it’s more of a celebration of you *leaving*.”

“That must be it.” He nodded, lips twitching.

She looked up at him as he suppressed his smile, staring at his shoes. She wasn’t sure if she was allowed to speak to him, much less be this close to him, so she took a moment to drink it in. He must have felt her eyes on him. He lifted his head to look at her as the lift slowed for Level 4.

She turned away, and said, “Have a good day, Malfoy,” as she stepped off. She had to work so hard not to call him Draco.

~*~

She was just getting ready for bed that evening when she heard a peck at her window. Hermione found herself staring at a plain grey owl outside her window. Her heart pounded as she let it in. It dropped a plain envelope and swooped out.

She opened another *H.G.* letter with shaking fingers. It was short.

Miss Granger,

I appreciate your concern for my son’s business affairs. I accept your terms.

The inheritance will transfer in January, providing your social interactions with my son remain limited.

Madame Michele expects you at 8PM on Tuesday January 4th.

Lucius Malfoy

She fumed. He made an appointment for her without any consideration of her schedule?

She took a breath in, remembering that she had just saved Draco’s inheritance. She would need to *limit* her social interactions with him, though. That would be easy enough. They were limited before.

I accept your terms. Like they were business partners.

She huffed and laid back on her bed, tossing Lucius’s letter to the side.

January 1st couldn’t come soon enough.

~*~

She didn’t see Draco Thursday or Friday. She left work early on Friday, claiming sickness. She told Katie Bell to give her regards to Draco on his last day, but she wouldn’t be coming

to the pub after work.

She didn't see him that weekend at Cornerstone. She had never been so grateful for his absence.

On Monday, she was dragged into Mathilda's office to discuss her future. The position in House-Elf Relocation would be interviewing in the final weeks of December, but Mathilda still wanted her to apply for Draco's old position upstairs with Robards. Hermione nodded and thanked her, still feeling unsure of what she should do.

As the New Year's Eve Gala drew closer, Ginny dragged Hermione dress shopping. Ginny made an appointment for them at one of the high-end boutiques in Diagon Alley, usually reserved for wedding parties or the true wizarding elite. Ginny used Hermione's name on the reservation and suddenly a timeslot was available.

A salesgirl with shiny blonde hair assisted them, showing them to a private room of dresses only in their sizes. As they browsed the dresses, Ginny reminded Hermione that it was a "Black and White" gala. She'd need either a black dress or a white dress. Or a combination.

"I heard that Narcissa Malfoy ostracized someone for wearing grey to a Black and White gala before. The woman was never heard from again," Ginny said as she held a white dress out to Hermione.

"Why can't I just wear black?"

"Because *I* need to wear black. Obviously. I can't show up in a white dress. I'd be translucent."

"But… Why can't *I* wear black?"

"You want us both to show up wearing black, looking like we're at a funeral? No, Granger. Think of the overall aesthetic."

Hermione frowned and continued brushing her fingers across the fabrics. One of them was so smooth and soft that she stopped, tugging at the hanger. She pulled the dress from the rest and a luxurious white floor-length gown tumbled from her hands. It was remarkably modest – nothing too revealing in the chest area, sleeveless with gathered shoulders. Hermione turned the hanger around and found the back was completely open, dipping down to what she assumed would be the top of the hips, draping the fabric in a Grecian style. Far too revealing…

"Oh, Hermione. That's *gorgeous*." Ginny tossed the black chiffon dress she was toying with and ran to her.

"No," Hermione said. "But look at the back." She turned the hanger around and Ginny's eyes brightened.

"Perfect!"

Hermione was about to explain that she would much prefer herself to be covered, when the blonde salesgirl rushed in.

“The dress picks the witch, you know!” She grabbed the hanger from her and held it up. “*Exquisite* choice, Miss Granger. Hand-beaded at the shoulders and classically draped.” The girl ran her hands over the dress, pointing at the shoulders, fingering the fabric as it flowed from the hanger like water.

“I… I couldn’t wear something with an open back like that, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, try it on Granger!” Ginny rolled her eyes. “What the harm?”

Hermione huffed, thinking of her beige bra that was firmly strapped across the middle of her back. She took the dress and went into the curtained room. She shucked her jeans aggressively, adamant that she would hate this dress.

She bought the dress. It was stunning. Ginny convinced her that she could wear a different kind of bra that wouldn’t show across her back, or she could go braless, to which Hermione firmly disagreed.

~*~

They spent Christmas at the Burrow. Ron came for Christmas Day, and although it was strained, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had a wonderful time.

It was lovely to see George, and Percy was beside himself with jealously about Narcissa Malfoy’s New Year’s Eve Gala.

Molly kept trying to leave Ron and Hermione alone together, and the one time she succeeded, Ron broke the news that he was dating someone.

“That’s lovely Ron!” She smiled and tried not to feel the tug in her chest.

“Yeah?” He squinted at her, face pinched with anxiety.

“Absolutely. I hope she’s worthy of you.” She winked at him, and Ron relaxed.

“What about you? Are you seeing anyone? I mean… You don’t have to tell me –“

“No, no,” she said. “That’s quite alright. Er… no one at the moment. I have some big decisions at work in the next week that I’m concentrating on. Gawain Robards offered me Draco Malfoy’s old position.”

Ron’s eye twitched at Draco’s name, but he smiled at her. “That would be nice. You’d get to work with Harry.”

“Right,” she said, turning away. “But the other position that is open is in House-Elf Relocation.”

“Oh.” He looked at the ground. “That’s… wow.” He looked at her. “I mean… How would you chose?”

She laughed. “Exactly.”

She was glad to have people in her life who truly understood her. They knew her passions and where she wanted to end up.

The rest of the day was lovely. She received several books, of course, and a Molly Weasley sweater. She sent Monica Wilkins some Muggle treats in the post, wishing her and her husband a happy holiday season in Australia.

~*~

The following Friday was the launch party and New Year’s Eve Gala. Ginny arranged for a team of witches to do their hair and makeup, which made Hermione laugh.

“You *know* how to do your hair and makeup, Ginny! And you know how to do mine!”

“But I want everything perfect! I want to be invited back!”

Hermione shook her head at her. She guessed Ginny found these things just a difficult as she did. Both of them had grown up on the outside somehow – Ginny as underprivileged and Hermione as Muggle-born – and now they were being invited in.

Ginny convinced the hair and makeup team to leave Hermione’s face as natural as possible, and to let her hair be down. The hair witch pulled half of her hair up, braiding it away from her face, and curling the runaway curls that lay on her back and against her shoulder. When she put on the white dress, Ginny told her she looked like a Greek goddess. Hermione swatted her arm and went to put on her shoes.

At their designated timeslot, Hermione and Ginny stood in front of their fireplace. Ginny had chosen a lovely black gown that she told Hermione was “sweetheart” style. She didn’t know what that meant, but she liked it on Ginny.

She grabbed her clutch purse – borrowed from Ginny’s closet – and waited for the ginger to hand over the Floo bag. Hermione could feel the air in the room dancing over the open back of her dress, and she already regretted the choice. She was far too exposed.

“Okay, Granger.” Ginny turned to her. “Here’s the deal. You need to find Draco Malfoy tonight and remind him that he’s in love with you.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “No, I’m serious here, Granger.” Ginny grabbed her arm. “January 1st is three hours away.”

Hermione’s eyes flipped to the clock. “That’s… I mean, Ginny… January 1st doesn’t matter. The transfer of the inheritance matters.”

“Then ask him when it transfers and then launch yourself on him at midnight!”

Hermione blushed and shoved Ginny off of her. “I will do my best. Are we ready?”

Hermione tossed the powder and stepped through the fireplace to find a completely different Malfoy Manor. Yes, the grand staircase was there, and the beautiful hallways leading to different wings of the house, but there were floating candles, magic snow falling and disappearing before it hit the ground, and at least a hundred people dressed extravagantly.

Ginny popped through just after her and cursed under her breath at the grandeur.

“My god, Hermione,” she whispered. “Run back to Azkaban and tell Lucius that you accept all terms.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and knocked her with her elbow. Just then she spotted Narcissa welcoming guests into the newly renovated drawing room, and Hermione didn’t know if the nausea she felt was due to Narcissa or seeing the drawing room again.

There were house elves – all hired for the evening, Hermione was sure – walking with trays of champagne and Firewhisky, so Ginny grabbed two glasses of champagne for them. Hermione gulped down hers and placed the empty glass back on another passing tray. Ginny laughed.

“Shall we?”

Hermione took a breath and lead Ginny over to the receiving line where Narcissa was shaking hands and smiling with all types of people. When it was their turn, Narcissa turned her eyes on Hermione, and after a pause, she smiled. Hermione’s heart beat again.

“Hermione, dear.” Narcissa pulled her into a hug. “It’s so wonderful you could make it. And this is Ginny Weasley, yes?”

Hermione watched as Narcissa greeted Ginny and they chatted briefly.

“Well, ladies, please do enjoy yourselves. I believe Mr. Potter is already inside. I will join the whole group in just a few minutes.” Narcissa clasped Hermione’s arm in a very friendly way.

Once they were inside, Ginny spotted Harry across the way. She went to save him from whatever conversation he was stuck in, leaving Hermione to take in the new drawing room.

It was completely renovated. It was as if the Malfoys has given the designer the instruction to make this room as unlike the previous as possible. Hermione couldn’t even distinguish where the landmarks of the room had been. She could not locate the exact spot she had been tortured by Bellatrix, or the fireplace where she had recently relived it next to the Malfoys in Draco’s memories. The phantom pain in her arm stopped tingling.

“Hermione Granger?”

She spun to see a tall, dark man approaching her.

“I thought that was you.” He smirked at her, and she then recognized him as a Slytherin.

“Blaise Zabini, yes?”

“The one and only.” He glanced her over, and Hermione stopped herself before she crossed her arms in front of her body.

Blaise held two glasses of champagne. He held one out to her, offering.

“I make it a point not to drink anything from a Slytherin, thank you though.”

He smirked at her. “Then you’ll have no fun tonight,” he said, taking her glass back and exchanging it for a fresh one on a passing tray. “The champagne is from the Malfoy estate in Verzenay, France.”

She stared at the glass as he placed it in her hands, coming to terms with the idea that the Malfoys not only had an estate in France, but they also had a Champagne vineyard. She recovered and looked up at him.

“I read that you lived in Italy. Are you back or just visiting?” Hermione sipped at her champagne, trying to figure out how to hold her clutch purse and her glass successfully.

“Back,” he said. “I will be joining Draco’s new business venture in January.”

“Oh, congratulations.”

“Thank you.” He sipped his champagne and watched her as his throat moved. “So,” he started. “Tell me, Granger. You’re in the Great Hall, Potter has the Elder Wand, the Dark Lord is defeated, then what?”

She smiled at the ground. So casual in the way he described the Final Battle. “I work for the Ministry in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

“And are you running the place yet?”

“No, I’m working in the Beast Division, mainly filing reports on illegal smuggling of dragon eggs.”

“Really?” He pursed his lips. “I would have thought you’d be on the fast track to Minister of Magic by now.”

“Well, maybe I’m just on the slow track.” She smiled at him. His eyes sparkled as he smiled back at her.

“And you’re engaged to Weasley?”

“Ah, no,” she said. “That was a misprint in the *Prophet*.”

“See, I don’t even read the *Prophet*. I was just assuming.”

“Then you assumed wrong.” She grinned. He reminded her of Draco slightly, same charm, same confidence.

“And you’ve become friends with the Malfoys? Lunch dates and the like?”

“I thought you didn’t read the *Prophet*.” She looked at him over the top of her glass. He quirked a brow at her and chuckled.

He stepped closer to her, placing his hand lightly on her waist. He brought his mouth to her ear to whisper, “Between you and me, Granger, you could do better.”

She shivered. Her cheeks warmed, whether from the comment, the champagne, or his hand on her waist, dangerously close to her open back. He pulled back, lifting his hand. He looked at her face with a cocky smile, and Hermione didn’t know what to do.

“Blaise,” a female voice. She turned to see one of the Greengrass sisters, pretty and smiling. “Draco needs to see you about his speech tonight.”

“Of course, he does,” Blaise smirked. He turned to Hermione, grabbed her hand, and brought her knuckles to his lips. “We’ll speak again soon, Granger.” With a wink, he turned to leave.

The Greengrass girl began to follow, then spun back, “Hello, Hermione.”

“Hello.”

Hermione still didn’t know which one she was. The girl smiled and continued away. Hermione sipped her champagne, following them with her eyes to find where Draco was. They turned left around a beautiful ice sculpture in the middle of the room, and she finally spotted a blond head. He was standing with the other Greengrass girl, which didn’t help her identify which was which. His black formal robes were lined with silver, and the threads caught the light as he moved. He leaned into Blaise, saying something that put a smirk on the darker boy’s face. Blaise responded and Draco scowled. Blaise gestured in her direction, and Hermione quickly looked away and began to pace the room.

Ginny and Harry found her as she was feigning interest in the hanging topiaries.

“Hermione, you look beautiful.” Harry kissed her cheek.

“Thank you, Harry. New robes?” She looked him over.

“Yes. Just like you ladies, I wouldn’t be caught dead at Malfoy Manor in an outfit I’d already worn.” Harry’s smile showed all his teeth, and Hermione realized that the Firewhisky glass he was holding could not have been his first. She looked to Ginny and she was rolling her eyes.

Hermione laughed, and feeling a bit reckless herself, said, “Well, cheers to Malfoy Manor! And their newly renovated drawing room!” She clinked her champagne glass with Harry’s and Ginny’s and then downed it. Ginny laughed, wide-eyed, and Harry gave a “Cheers to Malfoy Manor!” that was louder than necessary.

A flash went off to their left, and Hermione turned to see Bozo chronicling their drinking.

“Wonderful,” Harry said, and he smiled at the camera for the next picture with practiced ease.

“Well, no one can say the Gryffindors had a hard time fitting in!” Ginny toasted the camera and downed her champagne. She grabbed Hermione’s hand. “Come on, I see Skeeter coming. Let’s get another drink.”

Ginny lead her through the crowd, ducking under floating trays of hors d’oeuvres and darting around black and white dresses. Hermione giggled as she was lead through the archway into a second room with even more people. They stopped and took in the Malfoy ballroom. It was twice the size of the drawing room, with opulent tapestries on the walls and a brilliant chandelier. A string quartet played in the corner and several couples were dancing in the middle of the room.

“Well, fuck,” Ginny said. And Hermione burst out laughing.

~*~

Hermione spent the next two hours sipping champagne and hobnobbing with the wizarding elite. She was introduced to several well-known Curse-Breakers whose books she had already read, a handful of Beauxbatons professors and graduates, and the German Minister of Magic. It wasn’t until 11:15PM that she realized there was almost a line of people standing around, waiting to introduce themselves. And Rita Skeeter was pushing her way to the front.

As the dragon specialist from Romania was saying goodbye, promising to follow up regarding a special project, Rita stepped in.

“Miss Granger. A few words for the *Prophet* on how the evening is going?”

“Uh… yes, it’s splendid.” Hermione deflated.

“Oh, Hermione dear, there you are,” said a voice to her right, and Hermione was astonished to see Narcissa Malfoy arrive as her knight in shining armor. “Rita will you excuse us, I would love to introduce Hermione to someone.”

Before Rita could say another word, Narcissa had turned Hermione and walked her away.

“I don’t actually have anyone to introduce you to, I just knew you would want to get out of there.” Narcissa linked her arm through hers.

“Oh, thank you,” Hermione laughed. Narcissa weaved her through the crowd.

“You look absolutely stunning, Hermione. You’re all anyone can talk about.” Narcissa squeezed her arm.

“Oh, I…” Hermione blushed. “Thank you. I’m sure that’s not true.”

She pressed the back of her hand to her neck, trying to cool down.

“Are you warm, dear?”

“Only a little. I don’t usually wear heels, so I think my legs are working harder than ever!”

“You know,” Narcissa started. She stopped and looked around like she was about to spill a secret. “Whenever I host these parties and I feel overwhelmed, I take a moment on my private balcony.”

“Oh?”

“Here,” Narcissa said. She pulled aside a curtain, and revealed a beautiful entryway to a balcony. “Take a moment to yourself, dear. They will be on you like vultures for the rest of the night.”

“Thank you, Narcissa.” Hermione smiled at her as she stepped out onto the balcony, wishing they had never parted. “I have to say, I’ve been quite remiss. I still have your books that I borrowed. Can I owl them back to you?”

Narcissa waved her hand. “Oh, I’d quite forgotten, dear.” Her eyes sparkled. “Why don’t we set up a date for you to come back and exchange them?”

Hermione blinked at her. She would allow her back? After everything? “I – I would like that very much, Narcissa.”

Narcissa beamed at her. “Draco is making a speech at midnight, so make sure to come back inside by then!” She winked at her, and disappeared behind the curtain.

Hermione turned and found she was overlooking the manor’s gardens. By the light of the stars she could just make out where the peacocks were sleeping. She walked the ten paces to the ledge, and felt the warming charm on the patio even with the wind. She ran her hands over the stone railing.

The reflection of the moon shone in a small pond to the left, and just next to it a gazebo. She wondered how stunning the view was during the day and then it hit her.

The Malfoy Gardens. This was where her wedding to Draco would be, if Lucius had his way. Her breath puffed a cloud in front of her, imaging the chairs facing the gazebo. The string quartet that she could faintly hear inside the ballroom would be set up on the shore of the pond.

She hated that Lucius had a lovely wedding planned. And that she couldn’t think of a better one.

She spent the next ten minutes or so standing against the railing, running her fingers over the smooth stone while she watched the wind move through the trees, listening to laughter and violins.

A burst of sound from behind her as she heard the curtain move, and she turned over her shoulder to see Draco exiting the party, champagne glass in hand.

He stopped in his tracks when he saw her there, and she was acutely aware that her bare back was facing him as she twisted her neck to look backwards. He looked surprised to see her.

Oh, Narcissa, you sly dog.

She swallowed as he continued towards her. She hadn't seen him since the lifts at the Ministry. That was weeks ago.

"You know, Draco, it's a Black and White party. Your silver accents are truly throwing off the whole aesthetic."

She tried a small smile.

"Ah, but I am the host. I must distinguish myself from the rest of the rabble."

He smiled back at her. She turned her gaze back to the gazebo, thinking that silver would be a wonderful color for a winter wedding…

"It's a beautiful party. I've never been to a Narcissa Malfoy New Year's Eve Bash. Is it always this grand?"

He stepped up next to her on the balcony railing, and she watched as the Slytherin ring on his thumb tapped the stone railing. He sighed.

"Just about. Twice as many people."

"All clamoring to be nearer to the winner of Most Charming Smile, December 1999," she said.

"I heard you were drawing quite a crowd yourself, Granger."

She met his eyes. He blinked and turned to the grounds. Something about his face was strained. She tried to put her finger on it but it lacked the ease of their last interaction in the elevator.

So she decided to make it more awkward.

"Where is Katya tonight?" She held her breath and wished for a rewind button.

He kept his gaze on the grounds, and said, "She's in Bulgaria for the holidays." She watched him as his eyes drifted over the pond and the peacocks. Did he also imagine his wedding in the Malfoy Gardens? "She is still desperate to sit down with you."

"Well, I would be open to that," Hermione said. "She's lovely." She watched as the muscles in his jaw worked. "How's the inheritance transfer coming along?" Draco looked up at her at that, and she felt the need to continue. "I remember you saying that your father would release it on January 1st," she said. "Is everything... falling into place?"

She focused on exhaling as his eyes shined at her.

"My father is… being slightly difficult, of course." He looked away and Hermione felt her blood rushing. That bastard.

"How so?"

“He says he’ll transfer portions of it over the next months. The first portion will transfer this Tuesday.” He cracked his neck.

Hermione’s mouth opened, shocked. Her first lesson with Madame Michele was this Tuesday.

“But enough about that.” Draco turned around. He leaned his back against the railing, facing the party, and turned his head to her. “Will you be taking the analyst position with Robards?”

She watched as his eyes danced over her face, feeling the warmth sneaking across her collarbone. “It’s a possibility.” She watched as his face tensed and relaxed, blinking at her. And it struck her.

He was struggling to build a wall. She noticed his breath moving more quickly than normal, and the stiff way he held himself. His tense jaw.

She turned away from him, looking out at the gazebo again. “There are a few positions open, that I’m interested in. I had two interviews this week.”

“They didn’t truly make you interview?” he asked, lifting a brow at her. She nodded, confused. “So you sent in the wrong resume again? I’ve told you before, it just needs to say Golden Girl across the top.”

She smiled, thinking of their first chat in the pub, when she’d told him she’d submitted for her job under a false name, not wanting preferential treatment.

“Where else? What other positions?” He sipped at his champagne glass, and she watched as he held it by the stem, between two fingers.

“House-Elf Relocation.”

“You don’t want to work in House-Elf Relocation, Granger.” Condescending, smiling at his shoes.

She turned to him, straightening. “Oh, I don’t?” she scoffed.

“You don’t want to sit in an office, filing reports on Elf beatings and misuse, only to pull them from their current homes and place them with a different set of masters to beat them. You don’t want to work under the current legislations.”

She watched him as his gaze ran over the curtains to the ballroom. “And what is it I do want to do?”

He looked at her. “You want to create the law. You want to change the world.” She watched him. “You can’t change the Ministry from within. And you can’t do *anything* from your cubicle in the Beast Division, Special Concentration in Dragon Research and Restraint.”

He looked back and forth between both of her eyes. He was telling her something. And he’d gotten his wall back in place.

“So you think I should take the position in the Auror Office?”

“Until they offer you Minister of Magic, that would be the best choice between the two. Upward mobility at least.”

She pressed her lips together as she stared out onto the grounds, and suddenly wondered if her lip color was still there.

“You have a speech at midnight?”

“Yes,” he said. He cleared his throat. “’Thanks for coming, best millennium ever,’ all that rot.”

She smiled. “You came out here to practice, didn’t you?” He nodded. “What else are you going to say?”

“Well, a bit about recruitment. Mother invited a lot of Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons recent graduates. Young witches and wizards who are looking for careers.” He leaned his hip against the railing, facing her. “Some elite members of society, too. We’re either looking to hire senior positions or take their companies on as clients.”

“You’re going to steal people away from their high-ranking government and private industry jobs tonight?” she said, smiling at his arrogance. He nodded. “With one midnight speech?” He nodded again, a smirk pulling at his lips. “And how do you plan to do that?” she said with a laugh. “Most of these *elite* people have standing positions or loyalties, lasting relationships.” She looked at him and he was already watching her.

“Anyone can be seduced, Granger.”

She felt her breath leave her in a silent puff. His eyes were dark and she felt very warm. She swallowed. Her eyes drifted to his lips on their own accord, and she knew she shouldn’t be staring at his mouth. She watched him swallow. She watched him step closer to her.

And she turned her head away, back to the grounds, taking a slow breath in. The money hadn’t transferred. She shouldn’t even be this close to him.

Her lips were dry so she wet them with her tongue and immediately regretted licking her lips in front of him. She blinked and searched the grounds for another topic, feeling the wind brush against her open back, ghosting over the fabric where it met her skin. She shivered. Was it the wind?

“What did my father say to you?” A whisper, his breath floating across her ear.

She gasped, feeling the heat of a finger on her ribs.

A voice from behind them, “Draco?”

Hermione whipped around, and saw Draco’s arm returning to his side as they met the smirk of Blaise Zabini.

“You gave me one job tonight, mate,” Blaise said, strolling towards them. “’Make sure I’m ready for my speech at ten minutes to midnight.’”

Draco’s wrist snapped up, checking his timepiece. “Er…yes, thanks mate.” He gave her a glance, and Blaise stepped forward.

“I’ll take care of her, Draco.” He winked. “She can stand with me.” Blaise offered her his arm, and she took it, cautiously.

Draco looked between them quickly, before nodding, and making his way inside. Blaise and Hermione followed him. Blaise led her through the ballroom and back into the drawing room where a stage had been conjured. A serving tray passed and Blaise took a glass of champagne as the clink of wands against champagne glasses began, echoing throughout the drawing room. Blaise gestured to the tray, telling her to take her own glass so she wouldn’t accuse him of handing her a glass again. She grabbed one and sipped, trying to cool down.

“This works out well then.” Blaise sipped at his champagne. “I was wondering who I’d get to kiss at midnight.”

Hermione looked up at him. He was smirking down her, letting his eyes travel over her face, down her neck. She scoffed at his confidence. He was so charming though.

“Blaise,” a voice in front of them. The same Greengrass sister. “Draco needs you.”

Blaise laughed a booming sound. “Oh, *Merlin*, he’s good!” He smiled and turned to Hermione, picking up her hand to kiss her knuckles again. “Maybe next year, Hermione Granger.”

He winked and followed the Greengrass sister.

The tapping of wands against glasses escalated, until she saw Narcissa’s white form ascend to the stage. She pressed her wand against her throat as the crowd cheered for her. She smiled graciously, and quieted the group with a delicate hand.

Hermione stood towards the back of the group, just where the ballroom flowed into the drawing room. She could just pick out Ginny and Harry, ahead of her. They held hands and leaned into each other. Hermione decided to stay put, instead of seeking them out.

“You are all too kind.” Narcissa’s cool voice flowed over the crowd with the help of the amplifying charm. “What a full year we’ve had.” And several people chuckled. “What a full century!” More laughter. “It’s such a pleasure tonight to see new friends, and old faces. Of course, some faces are older than others I’m afraid.” Narcissa brought her manicured fingers to her temples, tapping her own surfacing wrinkles. Even more laughter.

Hermione looked around as Narcissa continued, thanking everyone. Every eye was on her. She was in full control of her room, her people. Women were smiling, men were gazing, and even those scowling were silently in love with her.

“I told my son I wouldn’t take up too much time, so that we could still count down to midnight.” She turned and smiled at where Hermione assumed Draco to be standing. Hermione shifted until she could see him. “So please allow me to bring to the stage someone who would like to welcome you to the year 2000. Draco Malfoy.”

Narcissa turned to allow him up to the stage. He ran up the two or three steps as the crowd cheered him mercilessly. Hermione clapped, looking around and finding that most of the noise came from young witches in revealing dresses.

Of course.

“Thank you, thank you,” Draco said. “My mother, it seems, left me only three minutes to midnight.” Narcissa shrugged as she descended the stairs. The crowd laughed and Hermione glared at the girls who giggled.

Draco continued, “I think we’re all looking forward to the new year. I, for one, am desperate to leave the 90s behind. They were dreadfully boring, weren’t they?” His voice was light and sarcastic.

Hermione laughed out loud at that, and her eyes searched out the back of Harry’s head while the entire room lurched with laughter. Harry was shaking his head at Draco, smiling, and Hermione was struck by how things can change with just a year.

She looked back at Draco as he was smiling at his own joke. “And nothing terribly exciting happened this year either.” He pushed his hair back from his face in a delightful move that had more than one woman fanning herself. He lifted a brow. “Or did it? You’ll have to tell me, I was in Azkaban for the majority of it.”

Hermione sputtered a laugh and several people almost spat their champagne out, while Draco Malfoy smiled, mocking himself in front of a crowd. Raucous laughter. Incredulous giggling. The man next to her burst an “Oh, ho!” She watched Narcissa purse her lips, still smiling but quietly disapproving of his nonchalance, but next to her, Blaise was covering his mouth, eyes wide, and the Greengrass sisters were looking at each other with open mouths, giggling.

Hermione looked around the room as the entire wizarding world fell in love with Draco Malfoy even more than they already had. What was fifteen months in Azkaban if you had a sense of humor about it? She saw a surly older woman who had scowled at Narcissa Malfoy earlier, raise her fingers to her lips, hiding a smile.

Anyone can be seduced, Granger.

His voice fluttered across her ears as she watched Draco seduce them all. She watched him bite his bottom lip, grinning at his dig at himself. He swallowed and continued.

“No, but truly – it’s been a long and complicated year.” And the crowd quieted, still smiling at him. “It wasn’t long ago that I was the most hated boy in all of wizarding Europe. And I thank you all for giving me a second chance.”

She held her breath as the sound left the room, and the smiles drifted from faces.

“I’d say the year 2000 is about rebirth. Second chances. I’m starting a little company, don’t know if you’ve heard—“

Blaise let out a whoop and started a clap. The room joined in and Hermione then understood Blaise’s purpose.

Draco smiled and said, “And to me, this company is about second chances. It’s about achieving goals, dreaming ideas, and creating new paths. I want to assist people. I want to provide support and assistance for their goals, their businesses, their legal battles.”

Hermione thought of Quentin Margolis and his werewolf pack. And all of the other species Malfoy Consulting Group could assist. She smiled down into her champagne glass, feeling nothing but pride for her new friend, Draco Malfoy.

“We at Malfoy Consulting Group want to create the law. To change the world.” She looked up at him, hearing his words from the balcony. His eyes were already locked on her. Five hundred people between them. “And if like me, you find your cubicle becoming too small for you…”

She swallowed, her heart slamming against her ribcage. He looked away from her and smiled at the rest of the crowd.

“… We’re hiring.”

The crowd chuckled. The girls with too much makeup and too much cleavage waggled their eyebrows at each other and several middle-aged men smirked into their champagne, thinking of their cubicles. Hermione squeezed her glass, brain firing rapidly.

“And if I’ve done this right,” Draco muttered, shaking his wrist to see his timepiece. “Then we are now at –“

Hermione watched as Draco smiled.

“Ten. Nine. Eight.—“

Several people gasped and checked their watches. The obnoxious gigglers jumped up and down, and couples grabbed each other, ready to kiss.

“Seven. Six.—” The whole crowd joined in.

Hermione was still. She couldn’t find her voice as the throng of people added their voices. Draco raised his glass in the air and the entire room joined him.

“Five! Four!—“

She could feel the air entering and exiting her lips, but she felt like she wasn’t breathing. Then Draco found her eyes again.

“Three! Two! One!”

He lifted his glass to her as fireworks bounced around the room. He watched her as he brought his glass to his lips.

“Happy New Year!”

Hermione found her breath and lifted her own glass, drinking deep as he watched her.

A man in front of her turned to his wife and kissed her, his head now blocking her view of Draco. That snapped her out of it. When she could see him again, he was descending the stage, giving his mother a kiss on the cheek. She watched as he kissed the Greengrass sisters on the cheek, and then Blaise reached for him tapping his own cheek playfully. Draco pushed him away, wrinkling his nose. She watched as an older gentleman approached him, shaking his hand. They spoke briefly, with Blaise by his side, nodding heads. Draco gestured to Blaise and the older man shook Blaise’s hand. Draco’s first business deal of the new year.

Suddenly Ginny was in front of her, bouncing up and down and grabbing her face, planting a kiss right on her lips.

Hermione sputtered while Ginny laughed.

They stayed for another hour. Hermione made even more acquaintances, dodged Skeeter, and managed to say goodnight to Narcissa before they made their way to the fireplaces without seeing Draco again.

She got to her bedroom, kicked off her heels, and summoned a parchment and quill. She was sweating as she wrote:

Hermione Granger

-The Golden Girl

She folded it into an envelope addressed to *Malfoy Consulting Group, c/o Draco Malfoy*, and sent it without another thought in her brain.

She paced her room for twenty minutes in her white dress, imagining the way the champagne glass had felt against her lips as Draco sipped from his. A lover’s kiss at midnight.

She took off her makeup. She took off her dress. She tossed up her hair and pulled on her pajamas. She laid in bed, staring at the ceiling until she heard a pecking at her window.

An eagle owl swooped in as she opened the window, dropping a large manila envelope and swooping out. She picked up the package with shaking fingers and opened the top.

The cover letter read:

Welcome to Malfoy Consulting Group, Golden Girl.
D.M.

She gasped, the weight of it hitting her as she looked at the top of the packet he’d delivered. A contract for her position as a Senior Consultant, overseeing a department called Non-

Wizard Relations. Specializing in Magical Creatures and Muggle Relations.

She sat on the edge of her bed. And smiled.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to @jessamy on tumblr for the stunning art featured in this chapter.

I've created a Pinterest board of inspiration for anyone who'd like to see what I'm thinking of for Hermione and Ginny's dresses.
https://www.pinterest.com/lovesbitca8/chapter-24-the-right-thing-to-do/

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

You guys are absolutely ridiculous. I'm so overwhelmed by the love for this story. Shout out to the people who rec this on tumblr and facebook groups. Thanks so much to the readers who've been with me from the beginning, even finding their way over from H&V, and much love to those who have just discovered this story.

As for the suggestions of writing an AU version of this story, where Voldemort wins and the Auction takes place... How dare you. I've now drafted three chapters.

Hermione ran through her Charms homework in her mind as she walked the corridors. O.W.L.s were approaching and although no one else seemed inclined to study or care about them at all, she knew it was best to start early.

She used her time on Prefect rounds to review. There was so much silence around the castle by this time in the evening – now that Umbridge had begun with her "decrees" – that she would go insane if she didn't have something else to occupy herself. She'd asked Ron if he wanted to patrol with her, but of course, since his day for rounds was Tuesday, he'd abruptly declined.

"Why would I go twice?" he'd mumbled around pudding at the dinner table.

To keep her company? She rolled her eyes and continued listing the spells created in the 1920s. She turned a corner towards the History of Magic classroom and stopped mid-step.

Draco Malfoy had Pansy Parkinson pinned against the stone wall. He was kissing her. She was gripping at his arms.

Hermione blinked, feeling her breath leave her.

Her back was against the wall and her hands were tightening on his shoulders, twisting into his hair as he attacked her mouth with his. His right hand on her hip, and his left bracing against the wall.

She swallowed.

*These were… These were **Prefects** for Merlin's sake! **And** members of Umbridge's delightful little squad. They knew better than to be out, **canoodling** at 9PM on a Thursday! Leave it for your common room, damnit!*

Pansy smiled against his lips.

Hermione opened her mouth, ready to march over to them and forcibly separate them – because it was her Prefect duty, of course.

Then she watched as Draco pulled his mouth away from hers, panting, puffing air across her neck, and reattached to the place just below her ear. Pansy squeaked a small sound, biting her lip.

Hermione didn't understand what the big deal was. Anytime Viktor tried kissing her neck, he either tickled her or hurt her.

Hermione realized that she was standing in the middle of a corridor, watching Draco Malfoy devour his girlfriend… or lover… or whatever she was to him, she grumbled. She either needed to leave or to do her job and separate them.

She stepped forward just as Draco shifted his body, moving a knee between Pansy's knees. He leaned forward, letting his thigh disappear between hers, inching higher, and the moment his leg reached the top of hers, Pansy groaned, gasping and grabbing his hair.

"Draco…"

Alright. That was enough. Hermione narrowed her eyes at the two Slytherins.

*"Ex**cuse** me," she said loudly. Pansy's eyes snapped open and Draco removed his lips from her neck, but didn't turn to face her. "I'd hate to interrupt **whatever** is about to happen here, but it is now 9:08. As Prefects, you know that students should be in their common rooms."*

Draco dropped his knee, but kept his hand on the wall, panting. Pansy glared at her and stepped around him, straightening her skirt.

*"Oh, like you have **any** idea about what was about to happen, you prissy little Mudblood." Pansy sneered at her.*

"I have a few guesses," Hermione deadpanned. "Please return to your common room –"

*"Or what?" Pansy smiled. "You'll take house points away? You know you can't. In fact, as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad, **I'd** say you're being unnecessarily rude, Mudblood."*

Hermione bit back her comment, and watched as Draco straightened, stepping away from the wall, and turned to glare at her with hot eyes.

"I'd say, you're right, Pansy."

Hermione huffed.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, for questioning the authority of two Inquisitorial Squad members," Pansy declared.

"Ten points per Squad member, I'd say, Pans."

***Twenty points** for doing her job?*

"You're both ridiculous." She stepped around Pansy and continued down the hall, completing her patrol path. She turned to them. "If I find you in the corridors after curfew again, I'll be giving detentions."

Pansy sneered at her, and Draco, with his hair out of place and his tie twisted, smirked and said, "Can't wait, Granger."

She glared and turned on her heel, walking the long corridor to the left turn, knowing they were watching her the entire way.

~*~

"You did what?"

Hermione winced. She tried to just say it from the kitchen, while making eggs.

"I… applied for Malfoy Consulting Group."

The slap of Ginny's bare feet against the ground and the scrape of Harry's chair.

"When??"

She cracked an egg, back turned.

"At about 1AM last night." She tossed the egg shell in the sink and wiped her hands on a towel.

She'd been nervous all morning. She'd woken up terrified, questioning what she'd done, and now, just when she'd stopped questioning and started coming to terms with it, she told Ginny and Harry. So that *they* could question her.

"Why?" Harry's voice. She swallowed and turned around.

"He talked me into it. He reminded me that I want to save the world." She met Harry's eyes behind his glasses. His brows had disappeared under his messy hair.

“So you’re leaving your position in the Ministry, and all the upward mobility options, to become Malfoy’s lapdog?” Harry scowled at her.

“I won’t be Malfoy’s lapdog. I will be the Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations.” She placed her hands on her hips. And Harry’s eyes widened.

“Senior Consultant?” Ginny whispered. “What does that even mean?”

Hermione had no fucking clue. *That’s* what terrified her.

“I – I guess I’ll figure that out.” She brushed hair away from her face. “But I’ll be representing magical creatures, like the werewolf case he brought to me. I guess I’ll be arguing in front of the Wizengamot –“

“One of your favorite things,” Ginny supplied helpfully.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I’ll be able to seek out cases and causes that *I* want to focus on.”

“While working under Malfoy,” Harry supplied, unhelpfully.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

The three of them stared at each other in the kitchen, eggs sizzling behind her.

“I think,” Ginny said, “it’s an excellent career move…” She said it in a strained voice, lifting at the end.

“But…?” Hermione prompted.

“Well,” Ginny looked up at her. “You’ll never be able to sleep with him now.”

Hermione blinked at her, trying not to realign her priorities. Harry coughed and excused himself to the living room.

~*~

She handed in her two weeks’ notice to Mathilda on Monday morning. Mathilda wasn’t as shocked as Harry and Ginny were. She nodded her head, smiling, and told her she would miss her very much.

Aiden was very… Aiden about it. He gave her a high-five.

On Tuesday, she came home from work and took another shower, preparing for her first lesson with Madame Michele. She had Ginny braid her hair so it wasn’t a mess. She picked out her nicest robes and her terrible sensible heels. And at 7:45PM she stepped through the Floo to find herself in what seemed to be a little Tea Room.

She looked around the waiting area, glad to find it empty. She wandered through the tables, looking at the flower arrangements and fingering the little teacups. The pictures of teacups on

the walls reminded her slightly of the cat pictures in Umbridge's office, but at least the teacups didn't meow at her.

She didn't dare sit. There wasn't a couch to sit on, and she would have to pull a chair to sit, so she continued walking around the room in her sensible heels.

At 8PM on the dot, the door to the side room opened. A short brunette woman with an elegant turban placed on her head and small glasses hanging off the end of her nose raised a brow at her.

"Mz 'Ermione Granger?"

"Yes, hello."

"I am Madame Michele."

This was the abominable woman Fleur told her about? She barely came up to Hermione's nose.

"Hello. Wonderful to meet you, Madame Michele." Hermione stepped forward, fumbling her coat and her purse to reach out her hand.

Madame Michele stared at her outstretched hand, then grasped it with her gloved one, lifting her chin.

Oh dear. Was shaking hands not allowed? Should she have curtseyed?

The tiny woman released her hand and smiled up at her. "Please come into my office." Madame Michele stepped aside, gesturing for Hermione to enter.

Hermione took a seat in front of the desk in the corner. Another lovely airy room.

Madame Michele flowed into her chair, and Hermione was struck wondering how such a small body could move so elegantly. Madame Michele flicked her wand, and a Quick Quotes Quill sprung to life next to her.

"Do ignore ze quill, Mz Granger."

Hermione snapped her eyes back to the small woman, knowing she had guessed exactly where her eyes were.

The woman pursed her lips, looking at something on her desk. It was silent for several moments. Hermione didn't know where she was supposed to look, but she knew she was supposed to ignore the quill. There was a window behind Madame Michele, so as she waited for something to happen, she watched the clouds drift.

Madame Michele lifted the paper she was reading at her desk, and Hermione saw it was the *Daily Prophet* from Saturday morning. The front page stared at her while Madame Michele looked at the middle section of the paper, and Draco on the stage, holding his champagne glass up, glinted at her.

She had skimmed the article on Saturday, but Skeeter had been given practically the entire newspaper to gush about Narcissa Malfoy's New Year's Eve Gala. The picture of Harry, Ginny and herself toasting and drinking had made it on page 2, and another picture of her talking with the German Minister of Magic on page 4. Narcissa, Draco, Harry, and Blaise all had more photographs within as well. A pull-quote popped out, saying "Splendid evening!" – Hermione Granger. Well, she supposed that was half true.

Madame Michele held the paper in her fingers. "You are a stunning woman, Mz Granger."

"Oh, er… thank you."

"'Oh, er… thank you.'" Madame Michele dropped the paper. "Zat is 'ow you respond to a compliment?"

Oh. Yes, she could now see what Fleur meant.

"Thank you, Madame Michele," she corrected herself.

"So you think you are a stunning woman?" Her black eyes pierced her from the top of her small glasses.

"… No?"

Madame Michele smiled a condescending smile at her. She stood from her desk. Hermione stood as well.

"Let's 'ave some tea. I want to get to know you better." She glided around her desk and lead Hermione out into the Tea Room. Hermione followed, watching the little woman walk in her short heels. Madame Michelle stopped just outside the doorway to her office and reached for Hermione's coat and bag. She placed them on the coat rack. "Please, chooz whichever table you'd like."

Hermione looked at the twelve or so tables in the room and chose the large table in the center. She pulled the chair as quietly as possible and sat. Once she was sat, Madame Michele turned from her and went to the tea cart. She waved her wand and a cake and biscuit tray floated over to Hermione, landing in the middle of the table. The little woman heated the water with her wand and once it whistled, Madame Michele hand-carried the tray with the teapot, milk, and sweeteners.

She placed the tray on the table without magic, and took the seat across from Hermione. As it was six-person table, this meant they were quite far from each other.

"Tell me about yourzelf, Mz Granger."

Hermione blinked at her. Madame Michele had folded her hands in her lap, and studied her.

"I – Well, my name is Hermione Granger" – she could have Avada'd herself right there – "and I grew up here in England. I am an only child. Both my parents are Muggles, but at the age of eleven I received my Hogwarts letter…"

Hermione glanced at the small woman in the turban. She said nothing, but continued to watch her.

"So… I went to Hogwarts, where I met Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, two of my closest friends. And despite some… hiccups… and wars… we got out of there alive." Hermione smiled, trying "wit" against Madame Michele. "I work for the Ministry now – or, er, I *did* work for the Ministry, but I just accepted a job with Malfoy Consulting Group."

Hermione paused, wondering how long she was supposed to talk about herself. As Madame Michele nodded her head, tapping her chin with her fingers, she wondered if she should now ask *her* to tell her about herself. Was this a back and forth?

"Thank you, Mz Granger," Madame Michele hummed. "You managed to glozz over every interesting detail about yourzelf, focusing only on the 'umdrum."

Hermione's eyes widened. Humdrum?

Madame Michele stood, and swept up the top of the teapot. She dipped a stirring spoon in and stirred clockwise, three times, then took the pot over to Hermione's cup. Once she'd poured both cups, she said, "Milk, Mz Granger?"

"Yes, thank you."

Madame Michele hand delivered the milk to her, placing it just right of her teacup. "Sugar, Mz Granger?"

Hermione found that there was no honey on the table, so she looked up her and replied, "Er, yes, thank you."

Madame Michele lifted a brow at her. "You do not uz sugar, Mz Granger, so pleaz tell me what it iz you need."

Hermione swallowed. "Do you happen to have honey, Madame Michele?"

Madame Michele smirked. "I do." She waived her hand and honey appeared on the table. Madame Michele waited as Hermione slipped milk into her cup and dipped the spoon into the honey three times. Hermione was sweating by the time she finally stirred her cup, spoon clinking against the side only once, thankfully.

She looked up at Madame Michele, still standing next to her. She was smirking at the honey pot.

Hermione's heart dropped into her stomach as she wondered how many times Madame Michele had watched Draco spoon honey into his tea three times. She blushed and looked down.

Madame Michele took the milk back, took her seat again, and fixed her tea. Hermione watched as her hands moved. She didn't have paint on her nails, but her nails were trimmed and squared. Hermione picked at one of her cuticles.

Madame Michele picked up her teacup, bringing her saucer with it, and said, “You are too well-known of a woman to be azked to provide trivial detailz. Anyone who azks you to ‘tell zem about yourzelf’ iz either teazing you or flirting with you, Mz Granger.”

She frowned at her.

“Do not frown.”

Hermione relaxed her face.

“Mz Granger, why are you ‘ere?”

Hermione immediately guffawed. She looked down at her teacup, ashamed now of laughing out loud. She schooled her features and looked back up at Madame Michele. She tried to think of Lucius Malfoy’s answer to this question.

“I am here to learn the social graces of pure-blood society that I missed out on as a child. I am here so that I may blend in better amongst my peers.”

Madame Michele shook her head, looking down at her cup. “Blend in…” She sipped. She placed her teacup back on the table and stood from her chair. “Mz. Granger, our lezzon iz over for tonight.”

What? When did it begin?

“I’m sorry?” Hermione stood. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no, Mz Granger,” Madame Michele waved her hand and two pieces of parchment zoomed from her office into her hands. “Never assume zat you are ze culprit.” She stared down at the first parchment, reading through it. She nodded and folded the paper, handing it to Hermione.

“Study zis, and return improved.”

“What is it?” Hermione said, not sure if she should open the paper here.

“Your notes.”

Notes? Madame Michele’s eyes were on the second piece of paper in her hands.

“You work at a bookshop on ze weekendz?”

“Er, yes,” Hermione said, wondering what was on the second piece of paper. Madame Michele glanced at her, raising a brow. Hermione corrected herself, “Yes, Madame Michele. I do.”

“I will schedule you with Mz Truesdale for Thursday evenings zen,” she said. “And Mister DuBois will owl you to schedule an appointment on either Saturday or Sunday morning.”

Hermione frowned. “Miss…?”

“Truesdale. Your dance teacher.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Oh, no… I was only…” She stopped. “I am only taking manners classes from you, Madame Michele. I am not taking other courses at this time –“

“Mz Granger.” Madame Michele removed her glasses and let them hang around her neck from a string of gems. Her eyes were tired, but direct. “The inheritance transfers tonight at 9PM.”

She felt her chest grow cold.

“But only a tenth of it.” Madame Michele pursed her lips. “Next Tuesday, at 9PM, another tenth will transfer. And so on and so on.” She leveled her stare on her. “Providing you attend and absorb your lessons zis week. All of zem.”

Hermione opened her mouth, an indignant sound popping out, and felt her blood boil. She clenched her fist around Madame Michele’s notes, and turned her eyes on the ground, burning a hole into in. Her jaw was tight as she ran through the multiple ways she wished to slaughter Lucius Malfoy. A small hand lifted her chin.

As she met her eyes, Madame Michele placed her hand on Hermione’s upper chest, just below her neck, two fingers resting lightly on her throat. Hermione’s eyes popped, alarmed.

“Head up, Mz Granger. Do not ‘ide your anger. Direct it. Control it.” Black eyes pierced her, and Hermione couldn’t breathe. “And most importantly, do not ‘ide zis.” Hermione felt a light tap on her throat. “It iz your only weapon.”

She removed her hand from her neck, and Hermione felt a weight disappear, a breath enter her body as she stared back into the firm but kind eyes of Madame Michele.

What the fuck was that?

“I ‘ave known Lucius Malfoy for a very long time, Mz Granger.” Madame Michele pursed her lips. “You are not ze first person to be blackmailed by ‘im, and you will not be ze last. ’E will get what ‘e wants, one way or ze other.” She held out the second piece of paper to Hermione. “Choose ze easy way.”

Blinking rapidly, Hermione looked down to find her schedule for the rest of the week. She had dance lessons on Thursday night, hosting classes on Saturday or Sunday morning, and she was to meet with an interior decorator on Saturday on her lunch break. This was to be her life for the next ten weeks.

She let out a shaky breath, trying to remember what Madame Michele just told her about directing her anger and not biting it back. She looked up at the tiny woman.

“Thank you, Madame Michele. How shall I pay you for tonight’s class?”

“It ‘as already been paid for, mademoiselle.”

“Oh, absolutely not,” Hermione snarled. “Please send the bill to my home address, and please return Mr. Malfoy’s money to him. I won’t be taking it.”

Madame Michele smirked at her, and nodded. Hermione grabbed up her coat and purse, throwing powder into the fireplace and returned home.

~*~

Whatever fond feelings Hermione had found for Madame Michele at the end of their lesson were quickly squashed when she read through her notes. The Quick Quotes Quill had been writing the entire time it seemed.

Do not wander in another person’s sitting room
Hand shaking?
Compliments?
Do not stare out the window like a fool
Do not choose the largest grandest table for only two people
Do not bounce your leg under the table
No need to stand when a woman stands
What in heavens name are your shoes?
Do not stutter – you know your own brain and you know what you mean to say

The list went on, filling the whole parchment. Hermione tossed it on the ground in exasperation. She picked it up again five minutes later.

She received the bill by owl shortly after she arrived home. Her jaw dropped. Perhaps she should have let Lucius handle it.

Then she remembered glossing over a figure for salary in Draco’s contract that was three times her current Ministry pay, and she conceded that she would, in fact, be able to afford Madame Michele’s fee once a week for ten weeks. Of course, she had no idea how much dance lessons, hosting classes and interior decorating lessons were going to be.

’E will get what ‘e wants, one way or ze other.

What was it that Lucius wanted?

Hermione bit her lip, and stared at the wall of her room that used to be *the* Wall. She thought he wanted her to stay away from Draco. That these classes were her punishment for disobeying him. But now she wasn’t sure.

~*~

Miss Truesdale ended up being the most horrid person Hermione had ever had the displeasure of knowing.

At Thursday’s dance lesson, she had her self-confidence so severely beaten by this withered ex-ballerina, that she ate a whole carton of ice-cream by herself.

Miss Truesdale made it very clear to Hermione that she would need *much* more than ten weeks to catch up, and took absolutely no pleasure in watching her move throughout the night. It wasn't until Miss Truesdale took her to a ballet bar and began taking her through a Muggle ballet warmup, that she looked at her with anything but distaste. Hermione's two years of Muggle ballet as a six-year-old came flooding back to her, and she was at least able to remember the positions.

She received a letter on Friday – as she nursed her aching legs – addressed to Miss Granger. It was on M.C.G. letterhead and it was Draco's handwriting, but it seemed quite… generic.

It detailed a bit more information that the original contract and paperwork did not cover. First day for all staff was to be Monday January 17th, with true operations beginning the following week. It also invited all Senior Consultants to begin setting up their offices as early as the coming Monday. He proposed a casual meet-and-greet on Tuesday or Wednesday evening, so that all Senior Consultants could interact.

Hermione wrote back to him immediately, letting him know that Tuesday was no good for her, but Wednesday evening she could do. She frowned, thinking of her next Madame Michele lesson, having nine more to go. An owl got back later. Draco said Wednesday evening was the best option for most.

Her interior decorating lesson on Saturday afternoon and her hosting class Sunday morning were both adequate. Her instructors didn't seem to like her very much, and Monsieur DuBois made her feel like she was wasting his time. Her second lesson with Madame Michele was much like the first. Madame Michele greeted her the same way. At 8PM on the dot, the office door opened, and Madame Michele asked her if she had any questions.

"I—well …" Hermione took a breath and closed her eyes.

Do not stutter.

"Yes, Madame Michele. I was hoping you would explain to me the proper greeting, if hand-shaking is not allowed."

The corner of Madame Michele's mouth twitched, and she said, "You do take hands, Mz Granger, but you should do so az a lady. Not az a gentleman."

This was far too vague. The charms mistress saw her confusion and said, "Mz Granger, 'ow do you do?" She lifted her hand, but her palm didn't face out, like a normal handshake gesture. Her palm angled downward, her fingers delicately loose – like how Miss Truesdale had wanted – and she stepped toward Hermione.

Hermione's only choice was to take her hand with her own palm facing upward, like she was about to kiss her ring. "How do you do, Madame Michele." Madame Michele's fingers gripped her own, so only their fingers touched, not their palms.

Hermione felt ridiculous. She felt ridiculous for most of the night. Madame Michele instructed Hermione to please serve the tea. Hermione blinked at her and went to the corner

of the room, fumbling around with the service cart. She knew Madame Michele was watching her and she knew the Quick Quotes Quill was scribbling furiously in the next room.

She tried to remember everything Madame Michele had done the previous week, knowing that *that* was the test.

Her list of notes that evening was twice the length.

~*~

She needed new robes. She almost screamed in frustration on Wednesday evening when nothing in her closet suited her. She was about to meet her new co-workers, the people she would be working closely with and she had nothing to wear. She had Muggle outfits, Muggle business attire, but did she want to meet everyone screaming "I am Muggle-born!"?

She settled on her blue robes. They were the most comfortable and she loved the color the most.

The M.C.G. office was in Westminster, quite close to the Ministry headquarters. Guests were to enter using a door labeled "Deliveries" which would open to a lobby with a lift taking them straight to the top floor. Hermione called for the lifts, and stared down at her feet, taking deep breaths.

She at least needed new shoes.

"Hermione Granger?"

She turned to see a middle-aged gentleman with a briefcase entering the "Deliveries" door. She didn't recognize him.

"Yes, hello?"

"I heard you would be joining Malfoy Consulting." He had a warm smile. "Wendell Wentworth. Management Consultant." He held out his hand and Hermione completely forgot last night's instruction from Madame Michele as she took his hand. "I'll be working closely with Mr. Malfoy on cases for H.R., Financials, all that."

Hermione's heart beat again once she realized that "Mr. Malfoy" was Draco, not Lucius.

"Oh lovely." She hitched her bag higher on her shoulder. "I'll be overseeing Non-Wizard Relations. Magical creatures, Muggle relations..."

"My, what a splendid idea!" Wentworth beamed. "What a perfect witch for the job!" She liked him already. The lift arrived and they stepped in. "You know, Miss Granger, I do believe you and I are the only Gryffindors so far, so we must stick together!"

Hermione smiled, wondering if she was, in fact, taking a lift to the Snake Pit.

The doors split open to reveal a wide and open penthouse floor. There was a reception desk immediately in front of them, cubicles scattering the center of the floor, and doors leading to

private offices lining all four walls. Windows for natural sunlight stood proudly between the offices, and there were plants in corners. The room was alive.

“After you, Miss Granger,” Wentworth said. And Hermione remembered herself and stepped out of the lift.

A plump black-haired woman rose from behind the reception desk.

“Mr. Wentworth, Miss Granger. Welcome.” She did not smile. “I’m Dorothea. Administration Manager. Once we have our receptionists next week, I will be in my office over there.” She pointed a thick finger to the office over Hermione’s left shoulder, just right of the elevators. Hermione was secretly quite glad that this grumpy little woman would not be the one greeting visitors…

“You can see me for any administration issues, like paychecks, scheduling portkeys, those things. I’m available for everything you need.” Dorothea’s voice did not quite match her friendly, helpful words. “As you can see, our researchers, analysts and associate consultants will take up the majority of the center space.” Dorothea gestured to the cubicles in the center of the floor. “Mr. Wentworth, your office is this way, near Mr. Malfoy’s.”

Hermione followed Dorothea’s finger as it pointed to the left corner, opposite of the elevators. Mr. Malfoy’s office.

“And Miss Granger,” Dorothea turned around, pointing to the right, just behind her. “Your office is just here.”

A corner office. A corner office that was as distant from Draco’s office as physically possible. Hermione supposed that was for the best.

Dorothea seemed to dismiss them as she sat back at her desk, thumbing through a binder. Wentworth sent her a smile and bid her goodbye, heading toward his office. Hermione turned, taking in her office door. In between the elevators and her office was a couch, a little waiting area. Hermione smiled, thinking of clients waiting for an appointment with her. Maybe she’d have walk-ins. People who would wait all day for a moment of her free time.

She approached her office and saw the name plate on the office door just to the left of hers.

Blaise Zabini
Marketing and Public Relations

Hermione sighed, wondering how she’d get any work done around here.

She opened the door and found an office twice the size of her apartment’s bedroom. Her brows lifted and her lips parted as she took in the Cherrywood desk, with matching cabinets behind, and an entire wall of empty book shelves to her right. There were two huge windows overlooking Whitehall, one on each exterior wall of the corner office.

The carpet was plush beneath her feet, and Hermione stood in her doorway for several moments, looking at the warm seats in front of her desk, and the warm color on the walls,

thinking of how unimposing she would be behind this desk. She would be warm, and open.

She walked to the far corner, taking in the view from her desk. She gazed down at the Cherrywood and it finally hit her. Gryffindor dormitories. That's what this reminded her of.

She smiled and took a seat at *her* desk, running her fingers over it.

"Hermione Granger: Corporate Sell-out."

She looked up to see Blaise Zabini leaning against her door frame. He held a mug of tea and crossed his right ankle over his left.

He smirked at her.

"Corporate sell-out?"

"Sure. You've got the corner office, the high-paying salary, the private sector. Sold your soul to the devil, you did."

She raised a brow at him. "And if your office is just next door to *mine*, what does that make you?"

He lifted his tea to his dark lips. "Lucky." He winked at her as he took a sip.

She frowned at him even as she felt a blush creeping up her neck.

"Blaise." Draco's voice. Hermione sat tall and tried to look busy, even though she was clearly in the middle of a conversation with Blaise, with nothing on her desk.

"My liege," Blaise said, turning from his spot in the doorway and executing a deep bow. Hermione could just make out Draco's shoulder.

"When you are assigned an office, I expect you to stay in it."

"But I much prefer the view on this side of the building," Blaise said, his smile was a little too devilish for Hermione's liking.

"As Senior Consultant on Marketing and P.R., I need you closer to me. Clear out of that office." Voice firm.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy." Blaise saluted him, turned a wink on her, and exited her door completely.

So Blaise was assigned an office on the other side of the floor, but had moved his belongings and nameplate to the one next to hers? She shook her head at the empty bookshelves. *Her* empty bookshelves.

Movement from the doorway caught her eye and she lifted her head to see Draco poke his head in.

"Evening, Granger."

"Oh, yes, hi."

He disappeared. She slapped her hand against her forehead.

Hermione decided to take a breath and *get her shit together.* She was a working professional and she needed to start behaving like one.

She stood from her desk, intent on looking through her filing cabinets when she heard a knock on her door frame. My, it was busy around here.

She turned to see a thin man with stylish specs leaning into her office.

"Miss Hermione Granger?"

"Yes? Hello?"

"I'm Corban Hartford. Malfoy Consulting's solicitor." He stepped fully into her office and she took in his spiffy robes.

"The solicitor for the group of solicitors?" Hermione smiled. "You must be the best then." She shook his hand and he tapped his glasses up, grinning.

"I'm holding private meetings with all Senior Consultants on the contract and paperwork today. Is now a good time?"

"Yes, absolutely." Hermione turned to her bag and began pulling out the packet Draco mailed to her on New Year's Eve with the contract and guidelines. "Sit down."

She turned and Corban Hartford was gently closing her office door. How odd to have an office with a door instead of a cubicle. How odd to be in a closed-door meeting.

Corban took his seat and opened up the binder he'd carried in.

"Alright, so you have the original contract." His eyes flipped up to her fingers where she held it. "We have added addendums which I will be happy to discuss with you, if clarification is needed or if you'd like to negotiate anything." His voice lifted at the end, like this was his tenth time doing this spiel today. Maybe it was.

He continued in a slightly lazy voice, “Now, Miss Granger, keep in mind that although I am beholden to M.C.G., and Mr. Malfoy himself, you now fall under the umbrella of M.C.G. I am your solicitor now, as well. You can come to me with any questions or if you need legal advice for yourself not only as an employee, but also as a person. The only time I will not be able to represent you is if you file *against* Malfoy Consulting Group or Mr. Malfoy. But it's my job here today," and he tapped the contracts and addendums, "to make sure there will be no reason to find myself on the other side of the court from you.” He gave a small smile.

Her brain buzzed with all the different ideas flying through her head. All the different possible ways she could find herself battling M.C.G. in court. Battling Draco.

“Alright, yes.”

He flipped a page in the binder. “So, we have the Workplace Guidelines, Non-Disclosure Agreement, Conflict of Interest Policy, Sexual Harassment documents including the Love Contract, Do Not Compete Clause, and of course your Duty Statement.”

Hermione blinked.

“Er… There are a couple of terms in there that will need to be explained to me.”

“Of course,” Corban said, taking his glasses off to clean them. Corban then launched into a discourse to define the Workplace Guidelines. Then he fully defined the Non-Disclosure Agreement. By the time he started on the Conflict of Interest Policy, Hermione’s knee was bouncing under the table, itching to speed him along. She knew what a fucking Conflict of Interest Policy was.

“With the Sexual Harassment documents, you’ll find the normal business,” he said, scratching his temple. “Any complaints can be directed to me, or to Mrs. Bulstrode in Admin” – Hermione realized this must be Dorothea, and she thought what an unfortunate pool of genetics there – “or you can complete an anonymous complaint, and submit it directly to the Ministry, to be examined by an outside source.”

Hermione blinked. “Yes, alright. And what is it you said about a Love Contract?”

“Oh, yes.” And Corban Hartford waved his hand, as if this wasn’t the most interesting thing he said in the past ten minutes. “The Love Contract Policy helps to establish some workplace guidelines for coworkers who become romantically involved. We’re asking all employees to disclose any current or past romantic relationships with another employee, and if two employees do become involved, to disclose it immediately.”

“Oh, of course.” That wasn’t really too bad…

“All relationships between managers and reporting staff members are forbidden, of course, as it would affect working relationships. If a manager and a reporting staff member choose to become involved, it is the manager who would need to excuse themselves from their position, and find employment elsewhere.”

Hermione’s face was tight. His eyes examined hers, and she watched as he assumed she was confused.

“Like for instance,” he continued, pushing his glasses up, “if you were to become involved with a bloke who was one of your associate consultants under Non-Wizard Relations – or a woman! Don’t mean to assume! –“

He smiled. He was quite cute and she quite wanted to kill him.

“—If you entered into a relationship with someone one tier beneath you, once it was disclosed, you would need to excuse yourself as Senior Consultant to continue seeing that person.” He crossed his leg. “Does that make sense?”

She stared at herself in the reflection of his glasses, hearing that Draco would have to be the one to leave *Malfoy* Consulting Group, should the two of them ever find their way to each other.

She swallowed. “Perfect sense.”

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Surprise! I wanted to give you all a treat for being so good to me, so here is an early update! To answer a few questions, yes, my update schedule is generally once a week on the weekends.
>
> Also, I am *living* for everyone's enthusiasm for the AU. The plan is to finish TRTTD, then start Draco's POV, then start the AU.
>
> Thank you guys so much.

Hermione spent the rest of the week cleaning out her cubicle at the Ministry, saying goodbye to her coworkers and friends, and taking beatings from her pure-blood teachers.

It had already gotten out that she was joining M.C.G. by Thursday. Skeeter wrote a quick blurb on Draco in the *Prophet* detailing his current social outings and his relationship status – surprisingly, Katya was not mentioned – and she managed to list the Senior Consultants that had signed on. Hermione recognized a few names, like Cuthbert Mockridge who had retired from the Goblin Liaison Office. She remembered Draco mentioning him.

On Friday, she received two anonymous Howlers at the Ministry. One from a pure-blood fanatic who was disgusted to hear that she would be tainting the Malfoy name with her dirty blood and Muggle ways, and one that chastised her for leaving her future behind and following a Death Eater blindly. It took her thirty minutes to leave the closed office that she'd silenced. Her mood on her last day was essentially ruined until they brought out a cake and threw a little party for her.

She took home her last box, and gave Aiden a hug. He smiled at her and told her maybe he'd swing by the bookstore once in a while. Hermione felt badly that they had never had a second

date, even though she honestly had no interest in a second date, but it was really the principle of the thing.

She'd gotten through her weekend classes, learning gothic architecture and how to create a cheese plate, and on Monday she was battling her nerves starting at four in the morning. When she heard Ginny leave at five for practice, she decided to simply get up, and get over to the office. She had one more box of things to pack up and bring.

She stood in the lifts to M.C.G. at 7:30AM, holding a medium sized box that she'd cast a feather-light charm on. The doors opened and she was relieved that Dorothea was no longer stationed up front, but instead a button-nosed redhead beamed up at her.

"Hi, I'm Melody!" She stood from the reception desk and held out her hand to shake. Hermione shifted the box around and held out her hand. Damn handshake.

"Hello, Melody." Hermione brushed hair out of her face with one hand. "Are you our receptionist?"

"One of them!" She had wide teeth, but all-in-all, she was quite attractive. "Oh! I'm supposed to let everyone know that there's an all-staff meeting at 9AM, then just Senior Consultants at 9:30AM. There's also a memo on your desk about it."

"Brilliant. Thank you, Melody."

Hermione shuffled her way over to her office door, managed to open it with one hand, and found Blaise Zabini in her office chair, legs up on the desk.

"Ah! The early bird catches the worm," Blaise said. His fingers were playing with a quill. Probably her quill.

She shook her head at him, and slugged her box to her guest chair, plopping it down. How early did he have to be to beat her?

"So, in this situation, am I the bird? Or the worm?" She frowned at him and placed her hands on her hips.

He smirked at her.

"You're too smart for your own good, Granger."

She grinned and plucked three books from her box. "Yes, I've been told." She walked to the bookshelves near her door and began filling them. "What can I do for you, Blaise?"

"Just wanted to bring this by." He stood from her chair and pulled a piece of paper from his inside pocket. He unfolded it and set it down on her desk just as she was returning to grab more books.

It read *Office Relationship Disclosure*. She blinked at it. She scanned down the document to see the *Partner #1* line had his signature and his printed name. *Partner #2* was blank.

“I thought it best to get a jump on this, Granger.” She looked up at him and his face was playfully serious. “Before the inevitable happens.” His lips twitched.

Hermione felt her jaw drop and a blush spreading, but she couldn’t help the way her mouth wanted to smile. He was the most *obnoxious* cad she’d ever known!

She cleared her throat and turned her expression as earnest as possible.

“Oh, Blaise, darling,” she began, “you know how sticky this Love Contract is. It would never work between us, love.” She bit back her grin as she took more books to the shelves.

“Ah, but I do believe you’re forgetting something, darling,” Blaise said. Hermione turned to him after she’d placed the first book. He sat on the edge of her desk. “We’re on the same tier. You’re not over me and I’m not over you – though I *am* open to both ways, I’ll have you know –“ His eyes sparkled and she looked down, twisting her lips to keep from grinning at his ridiculousness. “Senior Consultants dating Senior Consultants is really not as frowned upon.”

She looked up at him. He sat so comfortably on her desk, smirking at her. He was joking, yes? He was… riling her up. She shook her head at him and walked back for more books.

“Unfortunately, Blaise, I already have one of these in place with Mockridge. We’ve been doing it like Flobberworms for months now.”

She looked at him innocently, infusing regret into her stare. She watched his eye twitch as the image of eighty-year-old Cuthbert Mockridge came to mind.

“Oh, what a pity.” He said, grinning.

“Hmm.” She nodded.

His eyes glinted at her and she thought of how dangerous he would be to the young witches in the cubicles, like Melody.

A knock on her doorframe. “Granger?” And she turned to see Draco look up from a paper he was holding. Merlin, he was handsome today, dressed and pressed for his first day.

She watched as his eyes flickered between Blaise, still sitting comfortably on her desk, and herself.

He continued, “Quentin Margolis wants to schedule a meeting with us next week. I’ll make myself available whenever, so please respond and let me know.” He handed her the letter he was holding, and she skimmed it. There was silence. She looked up and Draco was frowning at Blaise. Blaise was grinning back at him.

“Blaise, are you prepared for your meeting with Dogberd this afternoon?”

“Yes, sir.” Blaise’s eyes danced.

“Brilliant. Gather your notes and I’ll meet you in my office in five minutes.”

Blaise brought his hand to his heart. “Mr. Malfoy, you don’t trust me?”

Draco leveled his eyes on him. “No.”

Blaise chuckled, jumped off of her desk and left with a “See you soon, Granger.”

Draco watched him leave the room.

“Who’s Dogberd?” she asked as she grabbed up more books.

“He’s in charge of the Chudley Canons.” Draco turned back to her, watching her. “Blaise is bidding for us to work their Marketing and P.R.”

“Oh.” She looked up at him. “That’s a pretty big deal, isn’t it?” She took the books to her shelves. She gestured out the door, to where Blaise just exited. “Is he any good? Does he have any idea what he’s doing?”

“Unfortunately, he’s the best.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, and he smiled, shaking his head.

“Glad to hear he’s worth the effort.” She chuckled.

“You like your office?”

She placed the last book and turned around. “I love it.” She leaned back on the shelves and smiled. He watched her.

“Good.”

Her chest was warm, thinking of the last time they’d made eye contact like this. Across a drawing room glittering with champagne, and before that, just inches away on a balcony.

She looked at the floor, took a breath, and moved back to her box, passing him. “So, an all-staff meeting today at nine? Followed by a Senior Consultant meeting?”

She began pulling her trinkets out of her box – a framed picture of her and her parents, little baubles that sat on her desk at the Ministry. She looked up when he hadn’t responded. His eyes were on her desk, where a piece of paper with Blaise’s signature still sat.

Her heart stopped.

“Er, yes.” He snapped out of it, and she opened her mouth to explain, to deny, to say anything. “Just a meet-and-greet, really.” He straightened the front of his robes and nodded to her. “See you at nine.”

She watched as his eyes turned off. And he left.

She threw her head back and growled. She grabbed the damn *Office Relationship Disclosure* and set it on fire.

~*~

She headed to the conference room on the opposite side of the floor at 8:50AM. She left her office and was surprised to see so many people filling up the cubicles. She closed her door, and the man in the cubicle closest to her office stood and waved.

“Miss Granger.” He walked to her and held out his hand. Again, Madame Michele’s lessons left her brain. “I’m Walter, your Associate.”

“My…?”

“Associate Consultant.” Walter grabbed his notepad and gestured for Hermione to continue towards the conference room. “Each Senior Consultant has one or two Associates and I’m yours!” He gave a bit of a “ta-daa!” gesture that had Hermione grinning.

He was… quite handsome... and married. She found the ring. He looked to be thirty-five or so, and suddenly Hermione felt very strange to be above this adult man.

“That’s wonderful. Hello, Walter, good to meet you.” She turned the corner around a set of cubicles and Walter followed. “And where did you work before this?”

“I was in Romania with the Dragon Sanctuary.”

Hermione stopped in the middle of the aisle and turned to him with bright eyes. “Oh! So you must know –“

“—Charlie Weasley, yes!” Walter smiled. “One of my best mates.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! Why did you leave the Sanctuary?” Hermione continued down the aisle when she saw that they were holding up quite a few people.

“My wife is pregnant,” he said, smiling. “So, it was time to leave the dragon-wrangling behind. Or so she told me.”

Hermione grinned. “I’m sure she’s glad to have you safe.”

Walter held the door open for her and she entered a conference room slightly bigger than the one she and Draco would use at the Ministry. Walter then held the door open for several more people, so Hermione was separated from him momentarily. Draco stood at the other side of the room, at the head of the conference table, speaking to Cuthbert Mockridge. There were ten or so chairs at the table, and about twenty lining the walls. Melody waved to her from the one near the door.

She was just about to take the chair next to Melody, slightly away from it all, when she noticed a pamphlet on the table with *Wendell Wentworth* on the cover. She looked to the right and saw that another Senior Consultant’s name was on the pamphlet next to that. It seemed seats were assigned.

She wandered past Melody and to the other side of the table, passing Mockridge’s name and passing Dorothea’s name.

Just to Draco's left, there was *Hermione Granger – Non-Wizard Relations.* She pulled her chair and sat down, frowning. She had thought her branch was isolated, removed. It was a strange idea for a branch of a consulting group, and she'd assumed she would be more of the "kid-sister" to the company, coming and going and bringing good opinion. But she was seated at Draco's left, like she was important somehow. More important than Wentworth and Mockridge, who were apparently working closely with Draco in Financial Consulting.

She raised her eyes and found Blaise across from her, watching her. Oh, perfect.

She started flipping through her pamphlet. It held the mission statement, the prose on company objectives, and charts on profitability.

At precisely nine o'clock, Mockridge took his seat and Draco called the meeting to attention. She looked around the room and found that the support staff and Associate Consultants were lining the walls. Several of the young witches in the room had their eyes raptly held on Draco.

"Welcome. Welcome everyone," Draco began. "Thank you all for taking a chance on Malfoy Consulting, and for taking a chance on yourselves." He tapped a knuckle on the pamphlet in front of him. "Dorothea has prepared some wonderful paperwork, that I trust you will go over at your leisure. But I did want to spend this time letting everyone introduce themselves, tell us what you'll be doing here." He turned to her. "Granger?"

She almost jumped. Draco sat. Her heart beat quickly, thinking how she didn't really know the answer to that question herself. She stood from the table, and felt every eye on her.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Hermione Granger," she said. Several people lining the walls craned their neck around their colleagues, trying to get a look at her. "I'm the Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations, specifically magical creatures, and Muggle relations." She wasn't sure if she was supposed to say anything else, but the words were flowing out of her. "I came from the Department of Magical Creatures in the Ministry, and I've developed a strong relationship with several groups of species." She could feel heat on her neck. "Er, and being Muggle-born will assist with the other bits…" Some people chuckled, and a few young witches smiled at her. "Er…" She looked to Draco. "Is that all I needed to say?"

He was leaned back in his chair, elbow resting on his knee, and hand covering his mouth. She could just make out the corner of his lips lifting. "More than enough, Granger." His eyes were teasing her.

She narrowed her gaze at him, thanked the room and sat back down. Dorothea stood and said, "Dorothea Bulstrode, Admin." And sat.

Hermione blushed. As people continued to introduce themselves with only their name and their title, less and less of them even bothered standing. She kept her eyes trained on her pamphlet, and finally looked up to see Blaise smiling at her, chuckling.

The rest of the support staff and Associates finished introducing themselves, and Hermione was tickled to note that Draco had only hired male employees under Blaise.

Draco said a few more things, empowering, yet authoritative. Then he released the support staff and Associates. Draco thanked them all and asked them to turn to page fourteen of Dorothea's pamphlet.

"I don't wish to be cagey with you all about financials or operations. I'd like to think that we're all a team here." Draco cleared his throat. "And within each department, we will all be responsible for meeting financial goals, keeping to a budget, and so on." He tapped his wand on the wall and a large version of page fourteen appeared across the paint.

It was the current financial map of Malfoy Consulting Group. Hermione wasn't sure how many people in the room understood that the start-up cash was Draco's inheritance, but she recognized it once she saw it split into tenths, projected to enter the accounts every Tuesday.

Her eyes glazed over the numbers, for the first time understanding just how much Draco's inheritance was. She blinked, surprised and anxious. He hadn't needed to work at all. He hadn't needed to work a day in his life, and yet he started a company. He threw it all away to leave his mark on the world.

Draco had been talking and she wasn't listening, so she tried to tune back in. He was starting to discuss the projected revenue for the months of January and February.

Cuthbert Mockridge cut in. "These ten installments…. Well, things are going to get quite tight at the end of January and possibly February once paychecks are cut."

"Yes." Draco said no more.

"Well," Mockridge sighed, "this investment…" Mockridge scratched his beard. "Do you have any worries about these transfers? Are there any… contingencies?" The way he asked, Hermione could tell that Mockridge understood that it was Draco's inheritance. And Mockridge understood it was coming from Lucius.

"Nothing like that." Draco shrugged. Hermione blinked. He had no idea… "But, yes, things are going to be tight if we don't work on our revenue stream immediately."

She wondered how the Magical Creature community was going to pay for her services. Her entire branch was practically a financial black hole.

"We are also looking for someone to fill our Wizengamot Relations position, so please spread the word," Draco said.

Hermione frowned. Wasn't that the position Tiberius Ogden was supposed to fill? Noelle's father?

Draco continued, "So I will be acting as Wizengamot Consultant for the time being, with the help of Corban Hartford, who you all met last week. Please use him as a resource for your own projects.

"On a higher note," Draco grinned. "We'll have the *Prophet* in tomorrow, along with a few other reporters. Rita Skeeter will be doing a write up for us, taking pictures, talking to staff.

Hopefully getting some good publicity for M.C.G. So please dress your best, and I'll be sending a memo this afternoon with talking points if you need any assistance."

Dress your best. Brilliant. Hermione tapped her quill.

"Thank you all for being here today. Meeting dismissed." Draco closed the folder in front of him and stood from the chair. His grey robes were stylized much like a Muggle suit, so he closed his front buttons as he stood.

Hermione quickly put away her quill and tucked away her papers. The other senior staff members were shaking hands and chatting about their families.

"Granger."

Hermione looked up to see Draco poking his head back through the door.

"You have a 10AM in your office."

Her eyes widened. "I do?" She jumped from her chair and followed Draco out. He led her down the office floor, ignoring the secretarial pool batting their lashes at him. "Do I need to have anything prepared? Who is the meeting with? Did I miss this memo?"

"Calm down, Granger." He stopped at her door. "It's just a preliminary appointment."

Draco opened her office door and stepped aside for her to enter first. A woman with crisp black hair turned in her visitor chair, and Hermione stopped in her doorway when Pansy Parkinson grinned at her.

"Granger," Pansy said. "Wonderful to see you."

Hermione watched as Pansy stood from her chair, her long legs carrying her across the room. She reached her hand out for Hermione's and she took it. She shook hands like a gentleman. If Hermione's brain was firing, she would have thought that to be interesting.

"I hope you've been well." Pansy's manicured hand released hers. She looked over Hermione's shoulder to Draco and said, "We're fine here, Draco."

Hermione's wide eyes met Draco's neutral greys. He looked back and forth between the two women, and then shut the door behind him.

Hermione looked at the door handle, begging it to turn again, before remembering that this was her office, not the Slytherin common rooms. She turned to Pansy and took control of the meeting as best she could.

"Pansy." She tried a smile at her, but Pansy was already grinning back, like they were old friends. "Please sit." Pansy sat again in the chair she had already claimed, and Hermione walked around her desk to face her. "Are you also on staff with M.C.G.? I apologize if I wasn't aware."

“Oh, no,” Pansy said, waving the air. “I’m just hoping to create a working relationship with the firm.”

“Wonderful,” Hermione said as she straightened her pencils and tapped at her ink pot. “And what branch are you most interested in?”

“You.”

Hermione looked up and Pansy was smirking. She suddenly felt like she was in the Great Hall again, and Pansy had figured out another way to tease her.

“Me.” Hermione repeated.

“Granger,” Pansy began, pulling a large book out of her bag. “I moved to France after the Final Battle and immediately began studying under Madame le Roux.” She plopped the book onto Hermione’s desk.

“Oh. That’s… wonderful.”

Pansy studied her face for a moment before clarifying, “Madame le Roux is the foremost designer of wizarding clothes in all of Wizarding Europe.”

“Yes, of course.” Hermione nodded her head like this was an accidental slip, instead of a lack of knowledge.

“She actually designed the wedding gown for your friend, Fleur Weasley,” Pansy offered, as if this would help ring any bells. “Regardless, I have started my own fashion line for the ‘Modern Business Witch,’ a woman who I believe is embodied by both her femininity and her dominance, her intelligence and wit, and her leadership in the wizarding business world.”

Pansy looked at her expectantly.

“Wonderful.” Hermione felt like that was the only word she knew today.

Pansy flipped open the book. The first page was a print ad from *Witch Weekly* featuring a stunning twenty-something girl carrying a satchel bag. She wore what looked like a Muggle business suit, but on closer inspection, the suit was actually wizarding robes. It was a perfect combination of the two cultures. Hermione looked up at the former Slytherin blood purist, confused.

“The *Parkinson* line focuses on the juxtaposition of the Muggle and the Magical, creating a world where the two can coexist.”

Pansy turned the page to show a fashion sketch of a woman in long Wizarding robes, but the robes were cinched at the waist, much like a Muggle dress. The next page had a take on the modern pant suit. Pansy continued explaining her designs, as she flipped pages, and Hermione found herself overwhelmed. The clothes looked beautiful and the models in the print ads were just as beautiful. Pansy seemed to be wrapping up her “presentation,” or whatever it was she was doing, and Hermione was still confused.

“The *Parkinson* line hopes to be the foremost designer for today’s working professionals.” And with that, Pansy closed her book. “All we need now, is the right model. Someone who not only will wear our clothes in the professional world, but who also embodies the ideals of the ‘Modern Business Witch.’”

Pansy looked into Hermione’s eyes with a grin. Hermione blinked.

“Of course,” Hermione said. “I’m sure the secretarial pool would be thrilled to be introduced to this line—“

“Damn it all, Granger!” Pansy slammed her book on the desk. “Are you the Brightest Witch of Our Age or not?? You!” Pansy rolled her eyes. “We want you to be the spokesperson.”

Hermione was torn between relief that Pansy was finally acting like herself, and shock. “Me?”

“Yes! You are the highest-ranking woman in the freshest company in all of the Wizarding World. You are a war-heroine who is pictured daily by the tabloids. When you are on the cover of *Witch Weekly* or above the fold in *The Prophet*, we want you to be wearing the *Parkinson* line, embodying the ideals of the ‘Modern Bus—‘”

“Yes, yes. The ‘Modern Business Witch.’” Hermione looked at the woodgrain on her desk. She felt a bit embarrassed, being singled out for something like this. She had never been interested in fashion or girly things, so to represent an entire group of people who did have those interests… But then she supposed that saying no was not an option. Draco clearly wanted her to have this meeting. Did he not trust her to represent the firm properly in her daily clothes? Or was he simply helping an old friend with her new business?

“How would this work?” Hermione asked. “What would it mean to be the ‘spokesperson’ for the *Parkinson* line?”

Pansy smirked, and Hermione now recognized a glint in her eyes that she had seen on Draco. It meant she was winning.

“Every Sunday evening you would receive that week’s clothes by owl. On the following Sunday you can return them as the new outfits arrive. I will label them as Monday, Tuesday, etc., but if you have any questions or if anything is not fitting correctly, I will be available by Floo every morning from six to eight. And, generally all five outfits can be interchanged—”

“So, I would be getting five new outfits every week? How long will this go on?” Hermione thought of her blue robes in her closet that were her “go-to” robes. She usually wore those twice a week. She wasn’t even sure she had five outfits right now to last all week without a repeat.

“We would start with a three-month contract and then take it from there.”

“Three months?” Hermione gaped. “Three months of brand new clothes every week?”

“Well, you may repeat an outercoat or a skirt—“

“Pansy, this really sounds lovely,” Hermione stopped her. “But it’s slightly overwhelming. And, we haven’t even talked cost. At this time I really don’t have the funds for—“

“Granger,” Pansy said. Her perfectly arched brow was raised. “You would be a spokesperson and a model. You would not be paying anything.”

“What?” Hermione stared at Pansy’s face, wondering just how she got her makeup to look like that.

“When someone asks you ‘What are you wearing?’ you reply, ‘*Parkinson*.’ That is how you pay for these clothes. Besides. You’re not keeping them. It’s like you’re renting them. It’s all very easy.”

Hermione was still torn, and Pansy must have sensed this.

“Let’s do a trial run, yes? Just this week?” Pansy pulled a pen and a pad out of her bag. “Write your address on here, and tonight when you get home from the office, you will have four outfits for the rest of the week waiting for you. Besides, the photographer will be here tomorrow. You’ll want to look your best.”

Hermione was just wondering what she would be wearing tomorrow while the cameras were here, so really there was no harm in giving Pansy her address.

As she handed over the slip of paper with her flat number on it, Pansy smiled and said, “Expect me at 6AM.”

"At... oh. You'll be over tomorrow morning?"

"Just to be sure everything is fitting right, see if I need to do any last minute resizing," Pansy said, grabbing her book and standing. "And I'll bring a stylist for your hair and makeup so you won't need to worry about that." She waved her hand and Hermione realized that she wasn't "worried about that" at all. She had not even thought about hair and makeup.

"Alright." Hermione stood to walk her out, feeling a bit dizzy. "Pansy, are you sure about this? I mean, there has to be another person who exemplifies this 'Modern Business Witch.' Someone who's in the papers often enough and – Katya! What about Draco’s… er, Katya Viktor?”

Pansy grimaced. “As a model, Katya is signed with certain designers already. And also, I hate her.”

Hermione laughed out loud. She bit back her grin, worry scratching at her face.

"Hermione." Pansy smirked at her. "You are the most talked about witch in all of Europe. The most photographed, the most respected… and soon to be the most feared." Hermione blinked at her. "Isn't it time you started dressing like one?"

~*~

She didn't get a chance to tell Ginny about Pansy and her crew coming over. She didn't expect Ginny to have the day off. So, when the redhead knocked on the bathroom door at 5:45AM as Hermione was getting out of the shower, Hermione jumped.

"Hermione… Your *friend* Pansy Parkinson is here…"

She wrapped a towel around herself and cracked the door, letting the steam out. Ginny's face was wide, and her hair was a mess from sleep.

"Tell me this is a nightmare?"

Before Hermione could respond, Pansy appeared behind Ginny.

"Hermione, love! So glad you're already showered. What kind of moisturizer do you use?"

She blinked at her. She was standing in front of Pansy Parkinson in only a towel. Ginny was right: it was a nightmare.

"Er… Well there's this Muggle product I sometimes put on my arms…"

Pansy's eyes shifted. "You don't use moisturizer?" Her eyes moved over her face. "Merlin, you've been lucky this far –" And suddenly Pansy Parkinson was pushing her bathroom door open and putting her hands on her face. She felt like she was about to be choked, or have her eyes gouged out. "Excellent pores, Granger."

"…Thank you."

"I've been telling her this for years." Ginny shook her head at her, curls billowing around her head.

"Yes, you really must use moisturizer. Ginevra, have you tried Harper Hoddy's Hush Cream?"

"I've heard of it, yes."

"It's lovely. You *must* try it. I have a sample."

"Oh, wonderful!"

Hermione stared at the two of them… bonding? Pansy called for someone out in the living room, and then a Greengrass sister was in the doorway too.

"Daph, can I get two samples of Hush Cream?"

Daphne Greengrass was *not* the nice Greengrass from New Year's. She was equally as pretty as her younger sister, but less inclined to smile, Hermione soon realized.

After Pansy and Ginny gushed more about this cream, and Daphne asked her if she knew how to apply it – "Doesn't it just go on your face?" – and Daphne showed her the upward circle technique, Hermione was ushered into the living room, still wearing only a towel.

Tracey Davis was there, setting up a hair station. Ginny played hostess in her pink pajamas, offering coffee and tea and then whipping together a tray of muffins.

Daphne prodded at her face while Tracey pulled at her hair and Ginny and Pansy talked shoes. Hermione sat still and drank her coffee whenever Daphne pulled a brush away. Tracey dried her hair and pulled it back into something she called the "power pony" after she curled it. Pansy had a tendency to ask her questions as Daphne was in the middle of something, causing Daphne to frown at her as she responded.

An idea struck her as Daphne came at her with an eyeliner pencil – what if they were painting her face like a clown, and ruining her hair. What if these Slytherin girls were torturing her to make her look ridiculous for public pictures. Her heart leapt, but then she remembered that Ginny was in the room. Ginny would know if they were.

When the girls were done, Pansy told her to try on the dress she'd laid on her bed. So, at some point, Pansy had entered her bedroom. Wonderful.

She shut her bedroom door behind her and finally took off the towel. Hermione sighed, stomach feeling a bit tight thinking of being interviewed today. And dealing with Skeeter. And Draco. And Blaise and Pansy.

She turned to see an olive green dress laid on her bed, with a vest of sorts on top. A pair of beige heels on the floor. It was… nothing she would have picked out for herself, but she could see how it fit into Pansy's Modern Business Witch aesthetic.

She slipped the dress over her head, liking how light the fabric was and how the long sleeves opened wide at her elbows. The bottom came just above her knees, and she was grateful that it wasn't really revealing or anything like that. She turned to see herself in her mirror and had to take a step back.

Her complexion was perfect. Her eyebrows were darker and more defined, and her eyelids were dark and deep without looking too much like…. well, like a prostitute. Her hair was in a high ponytail, tight and controlled, with curls falling to her shoulder blades.

The dress fit perfectly. She grabbed the vest, unbuttoned it and slid it over her shoulders. It was more of a waistcoat, really. It was a light brown leather and as she began buttoning it up the front, Pansy entered without knocking. Like the close friend she was.

"Oh, Granger." She brought her hands to her lips. Hermione looked down at herself. Had she done it wrong? Pansy continued, "You are stunning!"

Ginny ran in, still adorable in her pajamas and Tracey and Daphne followed, their eyes wide and gleeful. Pansy stopped her from buttoning the vest, claiming that she had no idea how *tiny* she was, and used her wand to size the fabric of her dress closer to her ribs. She helped her button up the vest, telling Hermione to tug at her breasts to get them to lift above the tight buttons. Hermione stepped into the nude heels, and looked in the mirror, Pansy appearing over her shoulder.

"*That* is the Modern Business Witch."

Even Daphne smiled.

~*~

Pansy, Tracey, Daphne and Hermione stood in the lift heading up to the top floor. It was a blizzard of activity when the doors opened. Rita was talking to Walter, Bozo was taking pictures of the office – focusing a bit too much on Melody – and another reporter was talking to Wentworth.

Pansy walked past them all, leading her tribe to the back left corner. Draco's office. She'd never seen it before.

It was all steel and leather and hilarious masculinity. It was just about the same size as hers, but instead of a wall of bookshelves, he had a black leather couch next to a singular bookshelf. His desk looked like it was made of stone instead of wood, like an obsidian or dark marble. His office was imposing and sexy. And she thought of how opposite her office was.

He wasn't in the office, thankfully, but Blaise was talking to a reporter, having a photographer dance around him. He looked her up and down as she entered and couldn't even find a comment to make, but he smiled as he continued what he was saying. It seemed Tracey and Daphne were here to check the hair and skin of the others being pictured. Daphne took Blaise to the side to smooth out his complexion with a darker color. Hermione watched the two of them frown at each other, not speaking.

Rita pounced on her at that moment, having followed them into Draco's office. She answered questions on what her role at Malfoy Consulting will be, and what cases she was excited for. Rita shoved her back against Draco's window, and had Bozo take a few pictures of her. Tracey came over and smoothed her ponytail, bringing her hair over her shoulder. Hermione didn't know how to stand or whether to smile or not, so Pansy placed her hand on her hip and told her to look out the window. Bozo loved it.

As she was being placed in another position, Draco entered, sliding his arm into his jacket. He stopped when he saw her and she met his eyes. The camera flashed. He fixed his collar and continued to Rita, shaking her hand. Rita blushed.

The photographers gathered in Draco's office, and slowly the Senior Consultants filed in. Rita began placing them around Draco's desk, getting them primed for a picture. Tracey and Daphne began running around, making sure the men's hair was in place.

It wasn't until that very moment that Hermione realized. She was the only female Senior Consultant. Yes, Dorothea was a managing director and would be in the same meetings, but she was in a room of men, mostly Slytherins, possibly pure-blood. She felt quite energized by that.

That was until Rita asked her to sit on Draco's desk.

She stared at her. Rita dragged her over to perch on the corner of Draco's very expensive looking desk. She looked for him, to see if he would stop this, and found him talking to

Pansy across the room. She felt a pain in her ribs at seeing them together, that she shook away. Draco looked up at her as she slid onto the end of the desk. He said something to Pansy and Pansy smirked at him. Hermione looked down.

The rest of the Senior Consultants were placed around Draco's desk, leaving the chair for him open. Once he took it the flashes started. Hermione smiled, then quickly looked at Wentworth, who was smirking confidently. She looked to Pansy who shook her head at her. No, do not smile.

Hermione left her features blank. That didn't feel right.

"Excellent. Pause!" Pansy said. Hermione was surprised she could take control of this photoshoot like that. Tracey and Daphne went to the men, sweeping their hair the right way and Pansy approached her. "You have to smile with your eyes, Granger." Pansy demonstrated. "Imagine you have a secret."

Which one? Hermione thought.

They started taking pictures again and Pansy grinned at her. Was it possible she'd done it right? The photographers repositioned them all a few times, once having all of them stand behind Draco in his chair. Hermione and Blaise framed him.

Then Rita excused all the Senior Consultants except for Draco, Blaise and her.

"We're going to focus a bit on this next generation." Rita's eyes were gleaming. "The youngest entrepreneurs."

Hermione swallowed. She directed them to the couch. Hermione felt very stiff suddenly. They had her sit on the arm of the couch. She was being treated much like a prop, she realized. Pansy saw her frowning and approached her.

"What's happening in that brilliant head, Granger?"

"I'm not sure I like this, Pansy. This Modern Business Witch. I really don't think I'm cut out for it." She looked away from her and Blaise was watching them. "I don't like how I'm… being draped everywhere. Like a doll."

Pansy lifted a brow. "Well, that is the world of fashion, Hermione."

"Then I don't think it's *my* world."

Pansy nodded at her, thinking. "Get through this set up, and I'll fix it."

Hermione stared at her, then nodded.

They had Draco sit on the couch next to the arm she was on. They put Blaise behind the couch, leaning forward. She had to cross her legs awkwardly, knowing that Draco's shoulder was right near her hips, and after a few shots, they directed her to place her hand just behind Draco's other shoulder on the back of the couch and lean her body that way.

After that pose was done, Pansy redirected them to the desk. She had Hermione stand two steps in front of it. She placed Blaise and Draco behind her, leaning on the desk. Hermione suddenly regretted saying anything, as now she was front and center. Pansy had her place her hands on her hips, staring proudly down the lens. She felt a power flow through her as the bulbs flashed. Pansy had the boys step out and gave her a book. They took several shots of her leaning on Draco's desk, reading a book. She felt quite comfortable. She smiled up at Pansy.

"Miss Granger, I am *adoring* this style on you. Who are you wearing?" Rita's quill twitched behind her.

Hermione looked up at Pansy. Draco stood just behind her, eyes running over her.

"*Parkinson*." Hermione smirked. The camera popped.

Pansy's lips parted in a slow smile, and Draco's eyes flashed at her.

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for all your comments and support! A mid-week treat for you for being the best! :) I forgot to mention last chapter that I updated my Pinterest boards with the Parkinson Line inspiration and Hermione's photo shoot outfit. I'm on there as LovesBitca8

Madame Michele was quite taken aback to see her in Pansy's clothes that night.

She was even more taken aback when Hermione burst out, "I can't handle this handshake thing! I—I just really can't get around it. I'm at work in a professional environment with *men* who shake hands like *men* and they aren't trying to shake hands with a *lady*. I can't do it and I won't." She huffed. "I'm sorry."

She looked at her feet, embarrassed.

"Az long az you know ze difference, Mz Granger" was her cool reply. She looked her up and down. "You look quite lovely. What 'as 'appened to you."

Hermione reigned herself in. "Thank you, Madame Michele." She added, "You're too kind." She looked down at her dress. "I have become the spokesperson and model for the *Parkinson* line."

"Oh! Mz Parkinzon. What an enchanting girl."

Hermione kept from rolling her eyes. Of course she was.

That night Madame Michele took the opportunity to teach her how to walk in heels and how to treat expensive clothes.

Hermione thought it was the only lesson thus far that she'd found in the least bit helpful for everyday life.

~*~

The next morning, Hermione called Pansy in a panic at seven in the morning.

"I'm so, so sorry, Pansy," Hermione said as the tall girl stepped out of her fireplace. "But I tried to do what Daphne and Tracey did yesterday, and I don't think it worked."

Pansy looked at her. "It didn't."

"I know, I know. I just don't want to be wearing this *amazing* dress, if my hair and makeup don't match." She gestured down at the lovely burnt orange dress that Pansy had her in. She looked up at Pansy – whose makeup was perfection for this time in the morning – and begged her with her eyes.

"Take it all off." Pansy frowned. "Take the dress off, take the makeup off, take that disastrous pony-tail out. Merlin, Granger, what were you trying to do?"

"I was trying to do the 'power-pony' thing that Tracey did yesterday!" she growled.

"Granger, you can't wear your hair in the same style two days in a row!" Pansy pulled a face at her.

"You can't just give me a closet full of beautiful clothes and expect me to know these things, Pansy!"

Hermione groaned and stomped away to take everything off. When she returned in her bathrobe five minutes later, Tracy and Daphne were in her living room, looking barely awake.

"Oh," Hermione said. "I'm so sorry to be such a pain to you all."

Tracey shook her head, like she wasn't a pain. Daphne didn't disagree with her.

"Alright." Pansy appeared from the kitchen, having brewed them tea. "We are going to do this in front of a mirror for the next three days."

As the girls started in on her, and Pansy went to throw away anything she didn't like in Hermione's closet, she wondered if this was what growing up in Slytherin would have been like. She didn't regret her seven years with the boys, and it was nice to have Lavender and Parvati leave her alone most of the time…

But she felt like this was how a weekend morning in the Slytherin dormitories would have been.

~*~

The *Daily Prophet* came out on Sunday morning, sporting the picture of Draco, Blaise and her on Draco's couch above the fold.

Perfect. It was her least favorite of all the pictures taken, but of course it was on the front page of the *Prophet*.

"NEW BLOOD ON THE HORIZON"
by Rita Skeeter

With poise and confidence, Draco Malfoy has started a revolution. He has hand-picked the team, he has secured the office space, he has arranged the furniture! The company that will bring forth major change in the wizarding world has opened.

A self-proclaimed "problem-solver," Draco Malfoy brushes his golden hair aside as he talks to yours truly about his major plans.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She leaned on the counter at Cornerstone, frowning at the title. It had... interesting connotations.

She scanned over the interviews of the other consultants, letting her eyes linger on the picture. She looked quite pretty. Pansy's dress was very complementary and the leather vest pulled her ribs in just so. The hair and makeup was spot on.

So it wasn't *her* in the picture that she didn't like. It was just so… sexy. Like a perfect little ménage a trois with the three of them. Just like she'd thought, Hermione's hips were awfully close to Draco's head, and Blaise had leaned forward just enough to bring his chest close to her shoulder.

This was a *consulting group*, not a *strip club* for Merlin's sake!

Hermione opened the paper to find an entire page dedicated to her. She gasped in the middle of the bookstore, and the hag looked at her like she had said Voldemort's name in vain.

The picture of her reading the book on Draco's desk took up almost the entire page. She opened and closed her mouth, wondering if Skeeter had played with the image at all. Her legs looked so long in the heels, and her lips looked so full. She watched her hand turn the page and her lips smirk.

On the accompanying page, Hermione saw a picture of her posing in front of Draco's window, and she recognized the moment when Draco had walked in the room and they had made eye contact.

Real-life Hermione blushed as she watched *Prophet* Hermione's eyes heat. "Oh, god…" She closed her eyes, blocking the image of herself watching Draco watch her. Was she really that obvious in person?

She sighed and read the article. The article completely about herself. Skeeter detailed the duties of the position, thankfully including bits from their interview about which magical

creature groups they would be focusing on in the first quarter. Then apparently Skeeter had interviewed the others *about* her.

A pull-quote from Blaise Zabini: "She's as passionate as she is beautiful."

Hermione's eye widened. How ridiculously inappropriate. She scanned the page and found that a girl in the secretarial pool told Skeeter that Hermione was "kind of a hero to her! Everyone at Ilvermorny knew who she was!" Hermione frowned. She didn't recognize the girl's name at all and made a note to figure out which one she was.

At the end of the article, Draco Malfoy was quoted. "What drew me to her was her mind. She's very logical."

Hermione pulled her head back. Logical? Well, yes…

The door to Cornerstone opened and she closed the paper on the pictures of herself. She looked up and Corban Hartford was coming through the door.

She took a moment to place him in her mind, finding it so difficult to see him outside of a discussion about office romance.

"Mr. Hartford! Hello!" She smiled as he waved to her.

"Miss Granger, I thought you worked here." He grinned as he stepped up to the counter. "I'm looking for a birthday present for my father, and I thought I'd pay you a visit." He pushed his glasses up and looked around the store.

"Well, it's my lucky day then." She pushed the paper away. "Anything in particular? Or just browsing?"

"I'd love suggestions, if you have any." He hitched a satchel bag higher on his shoulder. "He's not a fan of fiction, unfortunately, or else I'd have a few suggestions of my own."

Hermione walked around the counter. "You're a fiction fan, Mr. Hartford?" She led him towards the biographies and non-fiction.

"Yes, absolutely. It keeps my mind off all the law books I've memorized." He shot her a lazy smile. "And you can call me Corban. Don't worry about that Mr. Hartford stuff." He waved a hand away and looked to the stacks.

Hermione showed him to the Mattie McHandry books that she had initially showed to Narcissa. He bought two of them, and they chatted for a bit about how she was liking Malfoy Consulting.

"The article in the *Prophet* was lovely, by the way," he said.

"Oh, thanks." She blushed. She took Madame Michele's advice and took the compliment. "Being on the cover of the *Prophet* was never my favorite thing, but the article turned out nicely." She placed the books in a bag and handed them over. "I hope your father likes the books!"

“Me too!” He gave her a nervous face that she laughed at. “Good day, Miss Granger.”

“You can call me Hermione.”

He turned to her at the door. “Good day, Hermione.” He smiled and pushed his glasses up.

Hermione grinned a bit more after that.

~*~

When she got home from work, a letter from Ron was waiting for her. She put down her bag and as she picked it up, Ginny poked her head in.

“That arrived about an hour ago.” Ginny hovered in the doorway.

“Mhm.” Hermione read over the letter. Ron was questioning her decisions with wording like, “I thought you were taking a job in House-Elf Relocation or in the Auror’s Office? I’m completely floored, Hermione.”

Hermione read it through, frowning. She looked up at Ginny who was biting her lip.

“Well?”

“I’m just shocked that he hadn’t heard yet.” Hermione rubbed her face. “It never came up between you two?”

“I wasn’t going to tell him!” Ginny danced over to her, grabbing the letter and scanning it. “Oh, nice, Ronald…” she grumbled.

“And Harry never told him? And he didn’t read about it last week when Skeeter announced it? Couldn’t he have just sent me a Howler with the others last week?” Hermione sat on the edge of her bed. A copy of the *Prophet* lay next to her, and her bedroom eyes stared up from the sheets.

Ginny tried to make her feel better for a bit longer, but all she saw was the picture on the bed of her in a green dress with smoky eyes, with Ron’s words dancing in her head.

I guess you really are a Slytherin now, Hermione.

~*~

The *Daily Prophet* article must have done something wonderful for M.C.G., because the office was humming on Monday morning. Hermione barely had enough time to set down her coffee before a memo flew in, requesting all Senior Consultants for a meeting at nine.

She prepped her notes, conjured a full-length mirror to double check her work on her face and hair that morning, and headed to the conference room. Wentworth and Dorothea had taken their usual seats from last week’s meeting, so she did the same.

Draco and Blaise walked in together, laughing about something. It was sweet, really, to see the two of them behaving as friends, Draco taking a break from his boss personae.

Blaise sat across from her and winked. She raised a brow at him.

Just as Draco began his "good mornings," Corban walked in. Hermione smiled and waved to him. He grinned at her and set his briefcase down at the end of the table at the empty seat facing Draco. She hadn't seen him in the office at all last week, and as she thought about it, perhaps he didn't actually have an office here. Perhaps he was just dropping in from time to time.

She looked up at Draco, prepared for him to start. He was watching Corban. Draco looked down at his notes, shifted his feet, and began.

"Excellent first week, everyone. I think people are settling in nicely. I want to instigate weekly Monday meetings for an opportunity to check in, set weekly goals if necessary, share successes." He turned to Blaise. "Blaise just landed the Chudley Cannons for us last week. Excellent news."

Hermione turned to see Blaise grinning proudly.

"You're making me blush, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco continued, outlining the week. Draco and she would meet with Quentin Margolis on Wednesday about the werewolf project, and then Thursday or Friday they would sit down with Corban to discuss the upcoming steps with the Wizengamot. Mockridge had a few pureblood families that had hired M.C.G. to work on their finances, and Wentworth was pursuing a few businesses in Diagon Alley.

As he went on, and as the consultants engaged in conversation with him more, she realized she was hearing "Mr. Malfoy" quite a bit. It was strange. A bit too strange for her, but she guessed that calling him Malfoy was better than Draco. It wasn't as if they were friends, anyway.

"And lastly, do be careful with your mail," Draco continued. "The *Prophet* article really put us on the map, but not all publicity is good. I've already dealt with four Howlers this morning."

He scratched his jaw. He looked tired already and the day had barely begun.

He dismissed them, and after she packed up she passed Corban on the way out.

"Did your father like the books? Have you given them to him yet?"

"He… Well, he said thank you." Corban smiled. "He's not big on affection or gratitude… or paternal instincts, really…" Corban laughed down at the table. "So, he liked them enough."

Hermione grinned. "That's wonderful. Well, I'm always available for more suggestions. Let me know!"

“Brilliant. Thank you, Hermione.”

He smiled at her and began flipping through some notes instead of packing up, perhaps about to have a meeting with Draco – Malfoy. Malfoy.

She looked up and found him watching her and Corban. He looked away and began shuffling his notes as she left.

She turned out the door and straight into Blaise, who was leaning against the wall. He grinned at her.

“Yes, Blaise?” she bit out, continuing down the aisle towards her office.

“You and Hartford are friends. That’s adorable.” He followed. “You’re like two little nerds who grew up to be attractive.”

She coughed to hide her blush, hearing him behind her. “Blaise, if you’re into that sort of thing, I’d be happy to introduce you?” she tossed over her shoulder, and caught him smirking.

She rounded the corner and felt the eyes in the cubicles tracing them. Or maybe it was just Blaise, she thought, as Melody gave them a bright smile.

“Walter has your early morning mail, Miss Granger,” Melody sang.

“Oh, wonderful. Thank you.” She continued on, hoping Blaise would be caught up by Melody’s cleavage…

“I’m loving this Modern Business Witch thing, Granger.”

No luck. And it struck her that he was walking behind her, so the visual he was commenting on –

“Thank you, Blaise. Now go away.”

He laughed as she reached Walter’s desk. Walter stood and heaved a bin up on the ledge of the cubicle.

“What is that?” she asked in horror.

“Your mail,” Walter grimaced. He looked inside. “I’ve separated everything. To the left side of this bucket are the actual work-related letters and packages. I can go through some of that with you later, as I found a particularly interesting letter from the Snidget Society that I’d like to push with you.” He tapped the right side of the bin. “But over here, are all your personal letters.” He grimaced.

“Personal letters? I shouldn’t have personal mail delivered here.”

Walter scrunched his nose. “I quite agree. I was very uncomfortable opening everything, so maybe we can try a better system if this continues.”

“What kind of personal letters?” Blaise leaned against Walter’s cube, looking into the bucket smirking. He’d procured a cup of tea from somewhere.

“Well, some fan mail, some hate mail, a letter from Witch Weekly – apparently you have been chosen to grace next week’s cover – but also some proposals from eligible bachelors.” Walter rolled his eyes.

“Proposals?” Hermione frowned.

“Really?” Blaise sent a greedy look into the bucket. He raised his mug to his lips.

“I assume if I get any of those in the afternoon mail, that I can chuck them?” Walter said.

Hermione blinked, still not fully understanding the purpose of a *proposal* to an absolute stranger through mail. She looked to Blaise, smirking around the mug, and turned to Walter, raising a brow. “Are there pictures?”

Blaise snorted his tea out.

~*~

Quentin Margolis had suggested they meet at a Muggle café instead of coming into the M.C.G. office on Wednesday, which Hermione thought was an odd choice for a werewolf recluse. The North Forest Pack was a peaceful bunch, but apparently so peaceful that they had declined Remus’s invitation to fight at the Battle of Hogwarts.

She and Draco popped in to an Apparition point, and walked the several blocks. The silence was… comfortable. But Hermione still hated it.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” she began, and she saw Draco twitch his head to her, “what happened to Tiberius Ogden? I was very surprised to hear that the Wizengamot relations position was open.”

“He declined.”

Hermione looked up at him. His eyes were scanning the street as they stopped at a crosswalk.

“Declined? But I thought things were going so well. I mean to say, from the way Noelle was talking about it.”

She remembered a tipsy pixie girl sloshing around the news that Draco was only schmoozing her to get to her father.

Draco was silent. The signal turned, and he stepped off the curb, placing his hand on her back to guide her. She warmed, but focused.

“What did he say when you had lunch with him and Noelle?”

“He canceled.” Draco clenched his jaw. “He said he had no interest in the company.”

Something was unsaid. Hermione studied him as he grabbed a door handle, and let her enter the café before him. She stopped in the doorway.

“Do you want me to write to him?”

He looked down at her, and his eyes ran over her face. “No, we’ll find someone else Granger.”

She frowned and stepped through. Draco had also hoped Ogden would invest, if she remembered correctly. What a huge help that would have been…. She turned to him. “What about Noelle? I think I hit it off with her. I could see when she’s home next—“

“No.” His voice was firm, and his eyes were hard. “Do *not* contact Noelle. Do you hear me, Granger?”

She searched his eyes, trying to figure it out. “Alright.”

He swallowed and looked away from her, searching the café to see if Margolis was already set up at a table. Hermione frowned at her shoes – kitten heels, Pansy called them – and tried to think…

Draco and Noelle were out on a Thursday, and they were to sit down with Tiberius on Saturday. So in those two days, he had canceled. What had Noelle said to daddy?

Draco led them over to a couch area where she could just see a large bearded man. Margolis stood as they approached and he gave him a tight smile as they shook hands. After he greeted Hermione warmly, he introduced a second man she had not seen behind him on the couch.

“This is Mason,” the gravelly voice announced.

Where Quentin was dark and warm, Mason was fair and cool. He did not stand when he was introduced and made no effort to shake Draco’s hand or acknowledge him. He looked to be about thirty, although it was always hard to tell a werewolf’s age.

“Can I get anyone anything? Coffee, Granger?” Draco said.

“Yes, thank you.”

Quentin asked for a tea and thanked him. Mason looked Draco up and down and asked for a tea, and a ham sandwich, with a side salad with steak. Hermione had the distinct feeling that Draco was being tested.

To his credit, Draco didn’t flinch. He nodded and went to the counter.

“How is young Teddy?” Quentin turned to her.

“Last I heard, he and his grandmother were visiting Ron Weasley in Ireland.” Hermione smiled. Her eyes flickered to Mason, who was watching her lazily. “Mason, were you acquainted with Remus Lupin before he died?”

“I’d met him, yeah.”

He said no more. And Hermione could hear Madame Michele’s voice in her head regarding difficult guests.

“He was lovely. One of my favorite teachers at Hogwarts and a dear friend,” she said. “I assume you are also a part of the North Forest Pack?”

“Yep.”

Hermione looked at Quentin. He pressed his lips together and gave Hermione an apologetic look.

Draco returned with three teas and a coffee. Hermione suppressed a smile when she saw him juggling them without magic. He placed a plastic card with a number on it in the center of the table.

“Let’s jump right in, shall we?” Quentin said, leaning forward on his elbows. Mason stayed reclined. Hermione reached into her bag to pull her presentation folder as Quentin continued, “Mr. Malfoy and I had a very brief meeting in December. So I do understand the policy changes and the steps your group will take. I told Mr. Malfoy I would think it over, and discuss with my pack—“ he gestured to Mason, who was watching Draco – “and we would reconvene.”

“Excellent,” Hermione said, finding the page she needed. “I’ve drafted a prospective timeline for the case.” She grabbed a timeline for each of them, and handed them out. “I can begin interviews with members of the North Forest Pack as early as February. My Associate Consultant and I can come out to the North Forest, spend an entire week or two out there so that your pack and their routine is not disturbed—“

Mason chuckled. Hermione looked to him, but when he said no more, she continued.

“Once we have testimonials from the North Forest Pack, I can begin reaching out to donors who would fund the case. As Mr. Malfoy said in his previous meeting with Mr. Margolis, the North Forest Pack would not be paying for the services of Malfoy Consulting Group, but a few representatives are welcome at any fundraising parties. Once we –“

“So you’ll raise money for Malfoy’s business, based on our interviews.” Mason stared at Hermione. It wasn’t a question.

“We’ll be raising money for the *case*, based on your interviews.” Hermione pursed her lips.

“And tell me, Hermione Granger,” Mason said. “How much does it cost to get a court date with the Wizengamot?”

She blinked at him. “I believe it is a ten galleon filing fee.”

“Fundraising parties for ten galleons? My, my. Your business must be further in the hole than I’d thought, Malfoy.” Mason leveled his cool eyes on Draco. Draco returned his stare and sat forward.

“The fundraising would cover the costs of research, the trip to the North Forest, the salaries of the staff working tirelessly, accommodations for the pack if they choose to come into London for the case –“

“So, I give you an interview, I tell you how difficult life has been for me as a werewolf and how much I wished I was like the other girls and boys, and you give me a Ministry job? Is that how this works?” Mason said, steering the subject back to the policy. Hermione looked at Quentin, who was sipping his tea silently.

“No,” Hermione said, feeling her face heat. “With the testimonials from the North Forest Pack, we will give you the right to *earn* a Ministry job, should you ever be interested in one.” She felt her breath coming quicker. “Should any werewolf want a stable form of employment, this policy will disallow any form of discrimination. We will also be arguing for government sponsored scholarships to assist any cubs in their expenses while at Hogwarts, and the school will be required to have arrangements made at the full moon.”

Mason held her glare. Quentin cleared his throat.

“I appreciate all you have done, Miss Granger, in preparing for this project, and all the work you plan to do for the werewolf community, but we will need to decline.”

Hermione opened her mouth, brow furrowed at Quentin. A small sound puffed from her throat, before she could voice “Why?”

“It might be a bit easier for *you*, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don’t believe in being bought out for publicity,” Quentin said. He turned his harsh eyes on Draco.

Easier for *her*? Hermione frowned at him. She turned to Draco to find he’d gone very still, but held Quentin’s eyes.

“That’s very unfortunate, Mr. Margolis,” Draco said. “Is there anything we can do to change your mind?”

“Can you bring back Albus Dumbledore?” Mason quipped. He smirked at Draco, like he knew he’d just hit him in a soft place. Hermione watched as Draco’s nostrils flared but he did nothing else. Mason continued, “Or perhaps you can go back in time and put down Fenrir Greyback, instead of playing house with him for a year.”

Draco’s jaw clenched, and she felt like she could see the red in his vision.

Hermione turned to Mason. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.” The image of Greyback invading her bedroom swam before her. “Malfoy had no business with Fenrir Greyback that was not forced upon him—“

“I truly don’t understand you, Hermione Granger,” Mason hissed at her. “He fought against you in battle just two years ago and now you’ve thrown in your lot with him.” He smirked. “The pay must be *excellent* at Malfoy Consulting Group.”

Her blood was humming.

“If memory serves, Mason, you did not fight in my war. At least Malfoy had the decency to choose a side.”

The conversation stilled. Mason’s jaw clicked. She heard Draco take a slow breath beside her.

“You’ve *severely* misjudged Mr. Malfoy and myself,” she said. “What I do here is not for publicity, it’s because it’s the right thing to do. When I find myself in a position to be of assistance to undervalued people, I do everything I can to help. It’s not publicity.”

“But it sure makes for an excellent photoshoot,” Mason shot at her, then turned his eyes on Draco, “doesn’t it, Malfoy?” He smirked. He fanned his hands out in front of his face, reading a headline. “What a team. The pure-blood and the Mudblood.”

Her breath caught. And Draco sat forward. “Watch it,” he growled, so low that Hermione wasn’t sure which man was the werewolf.

“Alright. Let’s not descend into dramatics,” Quentin set his tea down. “Mason, are you quite done?”

“Oh, please, do stay.” Hermione stood and grabbed her bag. “You have your salad and sandwich on the way,” she hissed at him. She tossed the folder in her bag. “You know what, Quentin? I will continue on with this case because I *care*, not because I was paid to care. We will fight this injustice without you, and we will win, and we will celebrate, and you can thank Draco Malfoy when your children have equal rights as werewolves.” She was too loud for a Muggle shop, she knew. “Come on, Malfoy.”

She pivoted and stormed out.

She didn’t wait. She continued down the street, heels clacking against the pavement. She was fuming.

They clearly had no intention of working with them and they still took the meeting. Hermione ignored the part of her brain that reminded her that Quentin may have been respectful by declining in person, because Mason had been so purposely *disrespectful*.

*It might be a bit easier for **you**, Miss Granger, having been in the spotlight all your life, but I don’t believe in being bought out for publicity.*

Bought out? She huffed, feeling her hair fall out of its clips. She heard Draco’s shoes behind her, as his long legs caught up.

They strode in silence, every crosswalk opening for them. She chanced a look to Draco’s face at a corner, and saw him frowning at the pavement.

“I’m sorry,” she said. He looked up at her. “For them. I’m sorry they don’t see you the way I do.”

She continued down the street to the Apparition point. After five paces, she felt him lag behind her. She stopped and turned to him. He glared at her coolly, and she frowned, recognizing this look from his Wizengamot hearing months and months ago.

“I don’t need your pity, Granger.”

She looked at him. His jaw was tight, his hands in fists at his hips.

“You don’t have my pity,” she said. “You have my respect.”

She shook her head at him and turned, reaching the Apparition point first and leaving without him.

~*~

The werewolf lunch had soured her entire day. Walter tried to ask her how it went. She was confident that he would be the last person to ask her that question.

At four o’clock she finally just took a book off her shelf and began reading to quiet her mind. Not quite what she was paid for, but apparently she was paid too much anyway.

A knock on her open door and she looked up to see Wentworth smiling shyly. “Bad meeting?”

“The worst.” She closed her book. “They couldn’t just decline. They needed to decline while insulting my integrity.” She looked to her window. “They thought the entire case was a publicity stunt.”

“Ah,” Wentworth grimaced. “Well, it would have been incredible publicity. ‘Hermione Granger Frees the Werewolves.’”

That made her frown. “Don’t you mean ‘Malfoy Consulting Group Frees the Werewolves?’”

“Oh, no, no. It’s all you.” He grinned. She knew he was being quite kind but she disliked it after what Quentin and Mason had said. “I must admit, I had reservations about signing on with Draco Malfoy, but once I heard that *you* were on board, it really did sway me.”

“Oh, that’s so kind,” she said. “So, you joined quite late in the game as well?”

“Not too late. Around early December.”

She blinked at him. “Early January, you mean?”

“No, it was in the beginning of December. Around my wife’s birthday.”

She felt a cold weight settle against her chest. “So Draco told you in early December that I’d be joining M.C.G.?” She kept her face light.

“Yes, he said he understood any reservations I had, but here was what he wanted to do, and here was who had signed on to do it with.” He smiled at her. “I’m sure you were the deciding

factor for a lot of the people here, employees and clients."

She ran her tongue along her teeth to keep from speaking. She twitched her lips into a smile. "Well, thank you Wentworth. That's lovely to hear."

He nodded at her and left her alone.

She stood, buzzing. She paced to the bookshelf to put away her reading and went to shut the door so she could think.

Draco was on the floor, chatting with one of Mockridge's Associates.

How had he guessed she would sign on as soon as early December? Draco hadn't even brought up joining M.C.G. to her until December 31st. It hadn't even crossed her mind.

She watched him lean on the cubicle and roll his eyes at something, smiling.

But he brought by the werewolf portfolio earlier than that. In early December. He traded three books and a smile for a letter of recommendation and slid her a portfolio filled with his notes. Notes that swayed her, notes that piqued her curiosity…

Anyone can be seduced, Granger.

And suddenly she was on the Malfoy balcony again, in a white dress, watching as Draco leaned his long body against the railing and told her what it was she wanted to do with her life. He'd decided it all for her before she'd even thought of it herself.

He laughed at something one of the Associates said, and continued to his office, flipping through something. He felt her eyes on him and looked up at her, and nodded.

She stared back at him.

Quentin Margolis was right. Only it wasn't the money she had fallen for.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> A treat to start your week off right!
>
> Last one was a very *divisive* chapter apparently... So I give you a nice, long, action-packed present.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione wished she'd left The Wall up.

She'd finally gotten around to vanishing all the scribbled words just before Christmas, so her room was a blank slate again.

But she really would have appreciated a timeline right about now.

Draco had come into Cornerstone with the werewolf portfolio the first weekend of December, but before that, they hadn't spoken to each other in nearly two weeks – since the Marcus Flint incident.

Hermione frowned at her blank wall. Something must have shifted then. Something must have gone wrong if he had sacrificed his pride to come to her. He had freely admitted that he'd come to Cornerstone to ask her a favor.

Favors, she didn't mind giving. Manipulative publicity, she had a problem with.

Something tugged at her mind…. Something happened with Noelle and her father. And whatever it was, it happened before Draco asked Hermione to write to Quentin Margolis and before he'd started using her name to gather employees and clients.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. Draco had been very clear that she was *not* to write to Noelle….

So thirty minutes later, letter to Noelle off with an owl, she sat on the edge of her bed, kicked off her kitten heels and removed her jacket. Hermione dug into her bag to look through the portfolio Walter had drafted for her that day.

Walter was delightfully intuitive, Hermione had found. He'd knocked on her closed door that afternoon, finding her with her head in her hands, and had brought in every piece of fan mail and love letter she'd received thus far this week.

"Whenever my wife is having a bad week, I scramble together all the embarrassing poetry I wrote her at Hogwarts and all her N.E.W.T scores," he had said, shrugging.

Hermione had laughed. "Poetry?"

"Yes, during Professor Bins' class."

"Of course."

He had also brought in the Golden Snidget portfolio he'd been working on, and excused himself to let her read through her pile.

She had young business women writing to her for advice and thanking her for paving the way. She had war veterans penning letters of encouragement and praise. And one letter from a thirteen-year-old girl at Ilvermorny. She wanted Hermione's advice on a niffler she'd found in the trophy room that she wanted to keep as a pet. She also ended the letter with a request for Hermione's advice on how to respond to her classmates' teasing.

By the time she headed home for the day, Hermione had gotten a handle on her feelings about the situation.

She wasn't going to quit. That would be career suicide at this point, and she quite enjoyed what it was that she was doing at M.C.G. She enjoyed the possibilities. But she *was* going to let Draco know that she knew what was going on, and she didn't appreciate it.

And she would do it calmly.

She hoped.

~*~

By ten o'clock Thursday morning, she had worked herself up to speak with Draco. She would be direct and concise and honest.

She walked the floor to his office, and found the door closed. It was rarely closed, so he must have been in a meeting. As she approached to ask his assistant when she thought he'd be free, the door opened.

Pansy stepped out. Hermione blinked at her, confused. Pansy smiled.

"Hermione, dear!" She looked her up and down, assessing the outfit for today. "Wonderful, I was just coming to see you."

Hermione smiled and said something polite, all the while distracted by Draco having a closed-door meeting with Pansy. Draco appeared in the doorway, slipping on his jacket.

He met her eyes. For a moment she was fifteen, watching Draco and Pansy disappear behind a tapestry on her way back from the library.

She shook her head, finding the entire situation unwarranted. Pansy looked pristine, not a hair out of place, not a smudge on her lipstick. Just because Draco was dressing himself in his outer layer didn't mean that they had just…

"Did you want me?" Draco's eyes burned into her. She almost laughed out loud at the unintended double entendre.

"I, er – No, not if you're just on your way out."

"I am." He checked his timepiece. "I have a meeting followed by a meeting. Er, actually if you're available for lunch, my client would like to meet you." He pushed his hair out of his face, and grabbed a folder from his assistant. "One of the Honeydukes sellers is suing Honeydukes, and is quite the fan of yours." He looked at the folder.

She frowned. Well, if *this* wasn't the exact problem…

"No. I'm not free." Her voice was a bit firm. She could tell from the way Pansy's eyebrow twitched.

"Alright." He studied her. He excused himself and headed for the lifts.

Pansy turned to her. "Let's talk *Witch Weekly!* They'll be here on Monday for pictures and an interview." Pansy linked their arms, like they were old friends.

"Yes, let's talk. I'd like very much to not be in green for this shoot." Hermione shot her a glance.

Pansy raised her brows. "Really?" She smirked. "So Gryffindor red?"

"Just not Slytherin green." Hermione raised a brow back.

~*~

She sat down with Corban on Friday to discuss the werewolf case. There was still a lot to be done, even without Quentin Margolis and the North Forest Pack, but *not* having their support put a bit of a damper on things.

Corban helped outline the legal aspects of the next few months, and the two of them worked on the opening statement for the first day in the Wizengamot in March. Corban was just telling her a story about the strangest day he'd ever had in the courtrooms when Draco knocked on the doorframe.

She looked up at him, still smiling at Corban's story. He looked between the two of them.

“Hartford.” He nodded to Corban.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy.” Corban’s voice was still cheery from his story.

“How’s the opening statement?”

“We’re almost done with it, and then I’ll send it over to you for review.”

“Excellent.” Draco looked to her, jaw tight. “Granger, a Mr. Townsend is very interested in the Werewolf Policy.” He looked down at the letter he was holding. “He wants to have dinner with us next week to talk about financial support.”

He walked it to her desk and she took it from him. “Oh, that’s wonderful.”

“Tuesday at seven,” Malfoy said. He looked between them both, and turned to leave.

Hermione was too busy scanning the letter to hear him. Once his words sunk in she jumped. Madame Michele!

“Oh, I –“ But he was turning out the door. “Excuse me,” she said to Corban, jumping up and racing after Draco.

“Malfoy.” She stopped in the doorway, hand on the frame. He turned. “I – I can’t do seven on Tuesday.” He stared at her and she felt anxious. “I have … I have a thing.”

“Can’t you reschedule?” His stare was firm but inquisitive.

“No, I really can’t.” She looked away from him and toward her doorframe, trying to find a reasonable excuse. “Er… it’s … I have this…”

She looked back up at him and it seemed he had followed her eyes as she looked away from him. He stared a hole into her wall, right to where Corban was sitting patiently in her office. His eyes snapped back to her, dark.

He stepped toward her. “If you are postponing this *very* important meeting for something non-essential, I would question your priorities Granger,” he whispered. They were steps away from Walter and a few other workers. He stopped in front of her. “I’d hate to think that you’d prioritize a *date* above your Werewolf Policy.”

She blinked at him. A date? With Corban? That was a leap…

“I don’t have a date,” she hissed. “And even if I did, if I say I’m unavailable for a meeting, *I’m unavailable for a meeting,* Malfoy.” She narrowed her eyes at him. His burned into hers.

“Fine.” He bit out. “I’ll ask to reschedule.” He turned.

“Wednesday is best for me. I’m unavailable Thursday, as well.” She crossed her arms.

“Wednesday is not good for me,” Draco began.

“Oh, Malfoy, I’d *hate* to hear that you’d prioritize a *date* above your *company*,” she hissed. She rolled her eyes and returned to her office, listening to Draco huff.

~*~

She’d managed to piss Draco off again later that afternoon. It was a wonderful day.

While she still needed to speak with him regarding his treatment of her and her name, she couldn’t help but smirk and bat her eyes at him when his jaw clenched and he scowled at her again.

A wonderful day indeed.

She was balancing the ledger at Cornerstone on Saturday morning while reading through one of the new releases that had been shipped over. Corban said the author was one of his favorites, but she wasn’t fully invested yet. At one hundred pages in, that wasn’t a good sign.

“I thought you quit this job.”

Hermione’s eyes snapped up from the novel to see Draco standing a few feet from the register. His face was cold and his eyebrow lifted at her. She hadn’t even heard the door open.

“No. Should I have?” she said.

He frowned at her and leaned forward onto the counter. “Yes.”

Hermione looked into his grey eyes and felt cold. She felt very silly for being caught reading on her shift, so she picked up several books to refile and started for the stacks to the left.

“I suppose I didn’t find a logical reason to leave,” she said. “You know me. Only ‘logical’ thoughts in here.” She tapped her head with a grin, quoting his “favorite thing about her” and disappeared behind the bookshelf. She heard him follow her, as she knew he would.

She pushed several books to one side on a shelf just above her head as he appeared around the corner. She ignored him. He leaned his shoulder against the stacks and crossed his arms.

“You’ll need to put in your two weeks’ notice today.”

Hermione finished pushing a book into place and looked at him over her extended right arm. “I’ll need a better reason than ‘because I said so,’ Mr. Malfoy,” she scoffed.

“You signed a Conflict of Interest Clause.”

She paused mid-reach. “Conflict of Interest? How in Merlin’s name is a bookshop conflicting with a multimillion galleon organization like Malfoy Consulting Group?” She shook her head at him and moved to her left a few paces to file a large red tome on the third shelf. He followed, standing directly behind her as she faced the shelf.

“This is a public place of business,” he said. His voice washed over her right shoulder. It was unnerving to not see him, but feel and hear him. “Any one of our competitors could enter,

start a friendly conversation and ask you about your position at Malfoy Consulting. Or worse, the press."

Hermione pursed her lips and sucked in a breath through her nose.

"Besides," he continued. "You have a contract with Pansy. If the wrong person saw what you wear to this bookstore on the weekends, you'd be jeopardizing her career as well as your image."

This spun her around. "And *what* exactly is wrong with what I'm wearing?"

He sneered at her. "Muggle jeans and a scrap of cotton that barely covers you? It's hardly the epitome of the Modern Business Witch."

Hermione's mouth opened to retort, but anger tightened her throat. She didn't dare look down at herself, but she knew that the t-shirt she had on was not revealing in the slightest. She took a moment to take stock and felt the cotton material against her low back and belly, and knew that it was pulled down far enough. She couldn't stop herself when she pulled the last book she was holding toward her chest, like a shield.

"This is what I wear on the weekends Malfoy. I don't see why—"

"I'll have to have Pansy make you a weekend line, then. Because *this*," he looked her up and down, "is disgraceful."

Hermione scoffed. Her nostrils flared. "You will do no such thing. You are in charge of me Monday through Friday, Malfoy. Saturday and Sunday are my days off to do with as I please. I will work at this bookstore as long as I please."

He leaned into her, placing his right hand next to her head on the shelf. Her face was so warm and now he was closing off the rest of the cool air.

"I don't need people gossiping that I cannot pay my staff, Granger. If the world hears that Hermione Granger, Golden Girl," he grinned at her and she scowled, "and Malfoy Consulting's highest profile consultant, still works at her part-time job, they will assume you are not paid enough."

"Then I will set them straight when the reporters *descend* upon Cornerstone Books!" She rolled her eyes at him and stepped to her right to escape. His left arm came up, bracing on the third shelf and her ribs just grazed his arm before she stopped herself. He stepped closer and she felt the shelves creating indents across her back.

"For as long as you are employed by Malfoy Consulting, Granger, you will behave and dress as such. If you would like to go back to working as a Ministry dreg, filing reports and failing to create lasting change for your blessed creatures, be my guest," he said, his breath ghosting over her face.

How dare he. He was starting to sound like his father…

“I am only ‘employed’ Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, Malfoy. I am free—“

“Oh, I must have missed your resignation on Friday afternoons, followed by your application on Monday mornings then.”

“I am only *paid* Monday through Friday. You can only control my whereabouts Monday through Friday.”

“And what would it cost to control your Saturdays and Sundays then, Granger?” He quirked his brow at her and sucked in a lungful of air before continuing. “I’m sure I could more than cover the salary you make here.”

She opened her mouth and closed it. She wasn’t breathing. The heat from his body was suffocating her and she could feel her skin vibrating and her spine aching against the shelves. She chuckled in a way she hoped was condescending.

“I don’t *need* more money, Malfoy –“

“Then what is it that you *do* need?” His eyes flashed at her and his voice was hot against her mouth. A lock of blond had fallen across his forehead.

Her lips were dry and her eyes burned as they moved back and forth between his. She released a shaky breath and gasped in the air she could find. His face consumed her field of vision, and she watched as the corner of his mouth twitched upward and his eyes flit toward her lips.

“Hermione? Hello?” Harry’s voice called from the front of the shop.

Hermione closed her eyes and filled her lungs. Her eyes opened to see Draco straightening and stepping back from her. He kept his arms engulfing her, so she quickly stepped underneath the arm at head level, patted down her t-shirt and rounded the corner.

“Harry, hi,” she said. He turned from the counter. “I was sorting books.”

“Hey! I was coming to see if you wanted to grab lunch with Ginny and me.” Harry smiled at her, then his eyes slid over her shoulder and she knew that Draco had appeared. She watched as Harry looked back and forth between the two of them, taking in Hermione’s flushed face. She didn’t dare look at Draco.

“I don’t know, Harry,” Hermione said. She moved toward the counter and began to keep her hands busy. “You’ll have to ask my boss.” She shot him a look and Draco scowled at her.

“Uh… yeah. Malfoy would you like to join the three of us?

Hermione snapped the quill in her hand.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Malfoy is spending the whole day checking in on his Senior Consultants. He’s booked.” She slammed a volume down on the counter.

“I should be finished breaking up Wentworth’s Wizard’s Chest tournament by one,” he drawled. Hermione clenched her jaw.

“Great.” Harry looked like he wanted to just get out of the bookshop as soon as possible. “So I’ll see you both at Fortescue’s at one?”

“Sounds perfect,” Draco responded, directing his attention to Hermione. She huffed.

“Harry, what’s the *dress code* for this lunch? Should I run home first and throw on something a bit more *pure-blood?*” She kept her eyes trained on Harry, narrowing them and sneering like she was speaking to Draco.

“Er… No. I think what you’re wearing is fine. If you’re comfortable,” Harry said. Hermione turned to smirk at Draco. Harry continued, “I mean, do you have jeans without tears in the knees?”

Hermione’s jaw dropped and she heard Draco chuckle. She turned to him and his face was split in a huge grin.

“Thank you, Potter. For everything. I’ll see you all over there.” Draco reached across her to grab one of his damn mints and left smirking.

~*~

Hermione headed over to Fortescue’s scowling. It struck her as she was leaving that she could possibly be photographed again today, and if so, she would wish that she’d worn different clothes. Not that she’d led Draco know that.

Harry and Ginny had chosen a table a bit further away from prying eyes, thankfully. Draco was just arriving at the same time, so he held the gate open for her with a smirk and she glared at him.

After a bit of small talk, Harry and Draco went inside to the counter to order for them.

Ginny turned to her. “What in Merlin’s name has got you in such a mood today!”

Hermione sighed and shook her head. “Malfoy stopped by Cornerstone to insult my clothes.”

Ginny gasped. “Not Pansy’s clothes!”

“No, no. My clothes. These clothes.” She gestured down to herself. “He’s upset that I’m still working at Cornerstone, and he thinks I shouldn’t be seen in such *disgraceful* weekend clothes.” She sipped her water glass. “Then he offered to pay me more so I would wear better clothes on the weekends.”

“Did he use the word ‘disgraceful?’”

“Yes.”

Ginny was quiet. Hermione took her eyes off the street and found Ginny smiling into her cup of tea.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"It's just…" Ginny laughed. She turned to her. "Hermione. I was six when I saw a Muggle girl for the first time. She was wearing the tightest pants I'd ever seen and a t-shirt that showed off her shoulders." She smiled. "I asked my mum if she was a sex worker."

Hermione laughed. "Okay… At six?"

Ginny waved her hand. "I had all older brothers, so I unfortunately heard things… I'm just saying… Muggle fashion doesn't come easy to pure-bloods. It's very difficult to understand when all you're used to is baggy wizarding robes."

"So I look like a prostitute to him?" Hermione raised a brow at Ginny.

"No, no!" Ginny laughed. "I'm just saying… your jeans are awfully tight… to a pure-blood." She grinned. "Which isn't the worst thing in the world." Ginny winked. Hermione frowned.

She heard Harry's laugh and turned to find the boys returning. Hermione was so curious every time Harry laughed at something Draco said. It was unnatural.

Draco placed a cup of coffee in front of her and Harry set their number down on their table.

Once Ginny started small talk with Draco about M.C.G., Hermione had a moment to examine them, struck by how this "double-date" looked. She was suddenly very conscious of Draco sitting on her right, Ginny across from her, and Harry to her left. A perfect little picture.

She shifted in her chair, pressing her lips together and reached for her coffee cup, trying to pick up the saucer with the cup like Madame Michele had taught her. Ginny and Harry were telling Draco a story she already knew, so she tuned them out, setting her saucer down. She looked up to Draco, and he was watching her.

She looked away and crossed her arms over her thin cotton shirt.

~*~

Hermione received an owl Sunday night from Pansy, requesting that Tracey and Daphne prepare her for her photoshoot at the office the next day. They would be doing several poses, backgrounds, and wardrobe changes throughout the morning, and it would be best to set up in the vacant office next door to hers, seeing as her office was to be the backdrop of the photoshoot.

Hermione was quite exhausted going into the next morning. She dreaded this entire publicity thing, and she hoped she'd be done with it after this *Witch Weekly* article.

She reminded herself that this article was not about M.C.G., it was about her. She could focus the interview on how she was going to affect the wizarding world with the major policy

changes. Publicity for the Werewolf Policy and her upcoming projects was perfectly fine. Publicity for Draco Malfoy and his damaged reputation was not.

She arrived at 7AM Monday morning, and found that Pansy was already set up in the office next to hers. She had conjured a changing curtain for Hermione to get dressed behind, and the rack of clothes she'd brought in for the shoot.

Hermione's jaw dropped at the rack. The fabrics and colors screamed elevated fashion. And Hermione couldn't help but notice that there wasn't a scrap of green to be found.

"Pansy…" She couldn't take her eyes off the rack.

"I know," Pansy said, coming to stand by her. "I'm good, aren't I?" She grabbed a dress off the rack. "Try this on. I want to fit it to you before they arrive."

It was a light blue with silver lace laid on top. Something was vaguely familiar about it. Hermione took it from her and stared at it.

"It's based off your Yule Ball dress."

Hermione looked up to find Pansy smirking at her. "Really?"

"Well, you said no green, so I was stuck with so many colors that I hate." Pansy rolled her eyes and shoved her behind the changing curtain.

She began taking off the simple, but professional clothes she had worn in. She was just slipping on the periwinkle dress, when she heard a knock on the door.

"All good here?" Draco's voice.

"Yes, darling," Pansy replied.

"Granger here yet?"

"I'm here," she said. She stepped out from behind the changing curtain, and looked to Pansy. Pansy gasped and danced over to her, to help button the back.

She moved her hair over her shoulder and looked up at Draco in the doorway, suddenly very self-conscious that she didn't have shoes on.

He was looking at the dress with a tight jaw. He hated it. She narrowed her eyes at him. His eyes found hers after taking in the dress, and he blinked, turning away, like he'd been caught.

"Let me know if you need anything," he said. He looked at the doorframe of the office, keeping his eyes off of her. "We've postponed the Monday morning meeting until eleven, to give you enough time with *Witch Weekly*."

That was perfect, actually. Harry was meeting her for lunch at noon.

"Alright, thank you."

He glanced at her swiftly and left. Only then did Hermione realize that Pansy was finishing the last of the buttons, and Draco had essentially just watched her "get dressed." That's why he'd looked away.

She blushed and tried to focus on what Pansy was telling her to do.

"Oh, I hope they pick this one for the cover." Pansy pulled at the fabric with her hands and held her wand in between her teeth in a very un-ladylike way that Hermione found functional and hilarious.

"I love it. I can't even see myself in it and I love it."

Pansy wandlessly conjured a full-length mirror, and then went back to tugging at the embroidery. Impressive.

Even without hair and makeup done, Hermione looked like a queen. She giggled. And Pansy smiled up at her.

"I do love it," Hermione said.

"I love it, too."

"Malfoy didn't." Hermione chuckled.

"Are you kidding? He *adored* it."

Hermione looked down at her. Pansy was aiming her wand at the seams, but she looked to be speaking honestly.

After they'd fit that dress to her, Pansy had her try on a few that were slightly more "Modern Business Witch" than Fairy Princess.

She was just stepping into heels to match a deep red dress with extra fabric that seemed to be for *aesthetic* purposes, instead of function, when Blaise leaned in the door, sipping from a mug.

"The Gryffindor Queen has returned." He smirked. Hermione rolled her eyes. "Lovely work, Pans."

"Thank you, dear." Pansy ignored his presence after that.

"Do we need any help with zippers or buttons, or anything?" He smiled and Hermione shook her head at him, hiding her grin.

"Blaise, darling," Pansy said. "Do fuck off."

Hermione smiled. Blaise pursed his lips, holding back a smile, and was about to say something back when Tracey and Daphne pushed through the door. Tracey muttered an "excuse me" and continued in, but Daphne stood, waiting for Blaise to move for her.

Hermione watched as the smile dropped off his face. His jaw tightened as he moved out of her way, and continued on. Daphne frowned at his retreating back and then finally entered.

Before she had any time to think on that interaction, Pansy was unbuttoning her, and conjuring a bathrobe for her to sit in while they did her hair and makeup.

While Daphne layered on her face, and Tracey started twisting her hair into a complex style, Hermione asked if Walter could bring her work to do. She felt very foolish getting paid to sit and have her hair and makeup done.

People kept walking by the open door, and after seeing Draco across the way for the third time, she finally asked Pansy to shut the door.

Pansy was in and out for the hour. She was a restless person, Hermione realized, and she couldn't sit and just chat. She needed to be constantly in motion.

She'd been gone for ten minutes or so when she came back in, face set.

"Alright," Pansy said, rounding Hermione's chair and examining her. "We are doing Hermione's hair down today."

Tracey scoffed. "You're joking."

"Not at all." Pansy pursed her lips.

Tracey threw down the pin she was placing in Hermione's hair. She'd just spent thirty minutes on this lovely, complicated style and now she had to take it out because… because why?

"Is *Witch Weekly* here?"

"No, not yet."

"So who wants it down?"

Pansy batted her eyes at her. "Draco suggested –"

"Oh, no thanks." Hermione sneered. "Tracey, please keep going." She folded her arms and set her stare.

Pansy and Tracey looked back and forth between each other. Daphne smirked into her makeup palette.

"Er… I think what Draco means, is that you should look a bit more like the Hermione Granger we all know for this photoshoot. I agree with him a bit –"

"But this was Tracey's design for this shoot." Hermione raised a brow. "And it's lovely."

Tracey blinked. Pansy's lips pulled into a grin that she suppressed. "Well, how's about we compromise. Do half up, half down?"

Hermione stood, tossing her notes across the room. “If you’re too afraid to stand up to that entitled git, then allow me.” She strode to the office door, threw it open and marched out in her bathrobe, barefoot, face half made.

She ignored the stares and open mouths as she made her way to the office at the opposite corner of the building. Draco’s door was open, so she didn’t even knock. She turned into the doorway and found him reading something intently behind his desk.

“This is the hairstyle for the photoshoot today.” She gesticulated wildly to her head, and he looked up at her. He blinked and his eyes took her in from the top of her head to her bare feet. “Didn’t know it needed to be *cleared* with you, but this is it. “

“Did you really just parade through the office in a bathrobe?” He lifted a brow at her.

“Yes. Yes, I did.” She placed her hands on her hips. “And I’m thinking about doing it *more* often because it’s damn comfortable. And the next time you have input on my hair or my clothing, keep it to yourself.”

She turned to march out and he threw his reading onto his desk, standing.

“Granger, what is wrong with you?”

“Wrong with me?” she hissed. “Nothing is wrong with me. I’m trying to do *my* photoshoot this morning.”

“In *my* office, so calm down!”

“Actually, the photoshoot is in *my* office –“

“That I paid for!” He yelled.

She stamped her foot and pressed her lips together, keeping any quippy remarks about how *she* actually was the one *paying* for this office by *securing* his inheritance!

“I don’t understand why you are allowed to have any opinion on *my* hair for *my* photoshoot!”

“It was a suggestion –“

“Keep them to yourself!”

He walked around the desk. “What is going on with you?”

“Nothing is ‘going on’ with me—“

“You’ve been acting like a bitch for days!”

She gasped. “*Maybe* I’ve just realized that you’ve been a *dick* for *months!*”

He scowled at her and she could feel her breath coming in uneven gasps.

“Hi, hey,” a tentative voice said, and Hermione turned to see Blaise leaning into the doorway with wide eyes. “I’m just gonna close this door…” He reached for the handle slowly. “And silence the room, okay?” He looked between them both. “Something one of you should have done already,” he said, like addressing children.

“Don’t bother,” Hermione said. “I’m done here.”

“Granger –“

She waved him off and pushed past Blaise, ignoring the stares of the entire floor as she marched past them back into the office with Pansy and the girls.

“Alright,” she said. “Tracey, continue.”

Tracey raised her brows. Pansy turned away, smiling.

~*~

Hermione was exhausted by the end of the interview with *Witch Weekly*. She had worked so hard to keep the questions away from the vapid silliness of the magazine, but it was so difficult. She had managed to promote the work on the Werewolf Policy, and place a few suggestions on where she thought house-elf rights were headed, but primarily she had to discuss why her favorite color was blue, and what her favorite subject in school was.

The photographer got some lovely shots of her in her office, at her bookshelf and behind her desk. Pansy’s clothes were a hit, and they fell head-over-heels for the periwinkle dress. Hermione found time to mention to the interviewer how much she appreciated the *Parkinson* line for its blend of the Muggle and the Magical, and Pansy smirked at her.

It was five past eleven when they finished with her. She ran to the board room, still in the periwinkle dress and heels, and apologized when she interrupted Draco in the middle of his opening. She then had to walk all the way around the table to Draco’s left.

“You look lovely, young lady,” Mockridge said as she passed. She blushed.

“Oh, thank you.” She looked up at Draco. “Please, go on.”

He was looking down at the table. He swallowed.

Draco continued, outlining that week’s goals. There would be interviews that week for the Wizengamot Relations position, and Draco hoped to have it filled by the following week. Wentworth updated them with his success with the Diagon Alley businesses. He would be dealing with corporate restructuring for several of the chain locations, which made Hermione wonder if George would be interested in any assistance like that. She’d have to ask him.

When it came around the table to her, she updated them on the Werewolf Policy and then handed out a packet to everyone on the Golden Snidget project she was passionate about. It didn’t bother her one bit that no one else prepared packets for this meeting.

“Essentially, the Snidget Sanctuary in Somerset is requesting our help. The breeding rates have dramatically decreased this season, and the Snidgets in the Sanctuary aren’t living long. They want to be able to release Golden Snidgets into the wild, and to have the crime of poaching Snidgets or using them in unofficial Quidditch matches increased to a felony charge.”

She looked around the table as they flipped through her paperwork. Draco’s jaw clicked.

“This is an excellent project. I’d say you can start on this next quarter, once the Werewolf Policy is underway.”

She blinked. He kept his eyes on her paperwork.

“Respectfully, I’d like to begin now. The species is almost extinct as it is.”

“Do you have a client who will pay consulting fees or would this project need to be fundraised?” He looked up at her, and his eyes were unreadable.

“It would need to be fundraised. The Sanctuary did not indicate that they would be able to pay –“

“I want to make sure the Werewolf Policy is fully funded before you start other projects that also need fundraising.”

She scowled at him. “I *can* multitask, Malfoy.”

“But would it be beneficial to both projects to have your focus split?”

Her face was heating, and she felt all eyes in the room on her. She took a breath to bite back at him, and he cut her off.

“Like I said, an excellent project for April. We can send you and Walter out to Somerset in March to start collecting data.” Draco stood, and buttoned his robes. “Thank you for your time. Dismissed.”

She could feel her blood boiling. She turned and stomped her way out of the conference room, muttering, “Bloody idiot.”

Hermione couldn’t remember the trip back to her office, but it was clipped. She stormed through the half empty desks of her team, watching as people jumped out of her way, all the while ignoring the click of dragon leather about ten paces behind her.

She wandlessly shoved the door to her office open and once through, tried to slam it shut. She heard the door hit Draco on his way in and almost smiled.

“Granger-“

“Why am I even here, Malfoy?” She rounded on him. He closed the door to her office while keeping his eyes on her. His jaw tight. She continued, “You told me you wanted to ‘make a difference’ and ‘change the world.’ What utter hogwash.”

She turned from him and stomped to her desk.

“Like I said, Granger, it isn’t in the budget for this quarter, but starting in April –“

“What bullshit!” She turned from her path to her desk, retracing her steps back to him in the center of her office. She tried not to use such Muggle phrases around pure-bloods, as they usually did not pick up on the sentiment, but her mouth was moving faster than her brain as her blood pumped through her like a dam had been released. “By April the species could be extinct!”

“That’s an exaggeration.” He placed his hands in his trouser pockets and leaned back on his heels. He frowned at her, looking the picture of nonchalance, but his tense jaw gave him away. “You’ll be able to accomplish just as much in two months with a much larger budget –“

“Are you punishing me?” She placed her hands on her hips and raised her brows at him. She must thank Pansy later for today’s heels as they gave her much needed leverage in height.

“Punishing you?”

“Yes, because I haven’t quit Cornerstone?”

His eyes flashed at her.

“Or maybe because my weekend clothing is unsuitable to you? If I allowed you to ‘own’ my weekends, like you asked, would the Snidgets have a fighting chance?” she screeched.

“Granger.” He stepped into her, like she was a feral cat that he was cornering.

“Why am I even here Malfoy?!” She couldn’t bring her volume down as much as she tried. She knew she looked crazed, and her hair was falling out of the beautiful twist Tracey had pulled it into. “At Malfoy Consulting?”

“I wanted the best –“

“You said everyone needed a second chance, but I guess you weren’t talking about magical creatures. You were talking about the Malfoy family and their reputation.” She shoved her finger into his chest in a move she found particularly childish, but she couldn’t be bothered to care. He stood very still and did not even sway from the force of her push, which aggravated her further.

“Watch your tone, Granger,” he grit out, nostrils flaring. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and clenched his fists at his sides.

She persisted. “I’m glad I could really ‘round’ out your senior staff, Malfoy. My god, without me you wouldn’t have made your Mudblood quota.” His head twitched to the side so slightly. “How would you have ever changed public opinion of the Malfoy family without one? Isn’t that right?”

He narrowed his eyes at her and she knew she was in dangerous waters. She was overstepping the line but she couldn't stop. She started a small pace back and forth, for show.

"Or possibly I am here to be the *female* member of the Group. Couldn't truly operate without one of those, what with all the pesky equality laws the Ministry has been putting into place –"

"Stop," he cautioned. She saw the tension ripple through his forearms, up his shoulder blades. "Stop there, Granger."

"No, thanks," she quipped. "I'm not quite done." She stopped her pacing and planted herself not two steps from him. "I'm assuming that the most important quality that I bring to this team, seeing as it clearly has nothing to do with my relationship with the magical creature community, is that I am Hermione Granger, *Golden Girl*," she spat at him. "Were you hoping I'd spread a bit of that golden dust around, Malfoy? I admit, it makes for excellent photo shoots with your pal Skeeter!"

She shoved his chest with her hands. He was so stiff she wanted to *move* him somehow. Make him fight her. Of course, he did not even sway, but she did see that his breath was uneven now. Good.

"Is that it, Malfoy?" she continued. "Is it nice having the Golden Girl to show off, to headline your Daily Prophet articles? Well if it's not my blood status or my gender, it must be my *celebrity*." She pushed his chest again, and again nothing changed. She could feel everything rushing inside of her body, waiting for him to break her.

"Or maybe," she snarled, "I'm only here to play dress up with Pansy! Is that it, Malfoy? Giving a doll to your fucking *girlfriend?*"

Her right hand shoved his chest as hard as she could and she realized her eyes were blurring. Before she could pull her hand off of him, his snapped up and grabbed her wrist, holding it between them, so tight it might snap.

He lowered his head to hers, sent fire into her eyes and hissed, "Don't. Touch me."

She glared into his face, took her left hand and slapped his chest with it.

His free hand shot up, grabbed the back of her head, and pulled her face to his. And he kissed her.

And she was immobilized. Eyes open. A groan poured from his throat into her lips.

Her wrist in his hand, her head tilted up, and her breath lost. He placed open-mouth kisses against her lips, peppering her, and his breath hot.

He was kissing her. And she was doing nothing. She gasped at the realization, and his fingers dug into her twisted hair, tilting her head so he could taste her.

She closed her eyes, swaying into him as he attacked her mouth, gasping for air. His fingers were still so tight on her wrist and her left hand was stuck between them on his chest. She

curled her fingers on his shirt and he gasped. She tried chasing his mouth, letting her tongue taste him.

He stepped into her, and she had to step back before she toppled. His hand still caught in her complicated hair, he pulled her head back gently, leading her backwards.

His mouth left hers briefly and she almost opened her eyes to ask him what was happening, but he heaved a breath in, throat clicking around the air, before attaching to her again. He kissed the side of her mouth, moving his lips across hers in small movements. She was burning. She couldn't wait for him to take her again. She was forced to step back again.

Her backside hit the edge of her desk and his body pressed into hers. He was solid and warm. He was attacking her mouth again and spinning the most delicious sounds into her. She felt him take the hand on his chest and then place both hands behind her on the desk. She leaned backwards into them, and his hands smoothed across hers, planting them down, keeping them from moving. She wanted to move them. She wanted to touch him anywhere. Feel his chest, run up his arms, and oh how she wanted to track her fingers through his hair. But his hands forced hers to stay on the desk. She poured this frustration into his mouth, lapping at him and using her teeth lightly. He groaned and she found her knees being opened. His leg pushed between hers and moved her left knee outwards. He stepped in.

His left hand released her right, after giving a little push, telling her stay there. He carefully placed his hand on her waist. She moaned. He squeezed her lightly.

His tongue was doing such lovely things to her and her breath was coming in gasps in between mouthfuls of him. His body was pressing into hers and pushing her into her desk. She wanted to touch him. She removed her right palm from the desk and brought it up to his jaw, her little fingers on his neck and her thumb near their mouths.

At the contact, he gasped and his left hand slid down to grab her hip, pulling her toward him, connecting them, and his upper body started pushing her backwards.

A knock at the door she barely heard and a "Hermione, you ready--?" was the only warning they had before Harry stepped into the room.

Draco jumped away from her, turning away from the doorway. Hermione straightened and wiped her mouth.

Harry stood with his mouth open mid-word, with his hand still on the door knob. Harry's eyes moved back and forth between the two of them.

"Is it –" she tried. She cleared her throat. "Is it lunch time?"

"Er, yes," Harry said. "But I can come back later."

"No!" Hermione and Draco both said in unison. Draco finally turned to face Harry, tightened his jaw, and said "Potter," as he exited. The air was suddenly lighter.

Harry just stared at her, eyes wide, and a small smile growing on his mouth.

“God, Harry, don’t,” Hermione said, covering her face with her hands.

“I wasn’t going to say anything!” He laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Bwhahaha. ^_^ Photoshoot dress inspiration on my Pinterest. Username: Lovesbitca8

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for all the kind words thus far! Hope you like this one. :)

She had signed the Love Contract less than three weeks ago, and she was already letting him lay her down on her desk and ravish her.

She swallowed, rapping her nails on that very desk, and let her gaze blur at her bookshelves across from her. She tapped her quill against a parchment, creating little blots and blobs.

Would he have done it like in the movies? Sweeping her ink pot, her picture frames, her texts all off the desk so they crash to the floor, and then press her down. Maybe they'd laugh about it.

She blinked and shook her head, clearing the image.

She couldn't tell who had felt more awkward about lunch, Harry or her. It was the quickest and quietest lunch they'd ever had. Harry had asked for the date the day before, so she had thought he had news to tell her or some funny story, but he just sat and watched her eat. Watched her think.

She kept her door closed the rest of the afternoon, and every time someone knocked, she jumped. Hoping it wasn't Draco. Hoping it was.

Dark thoughts slithered into her distracted mind throughout the afternoon. What if Harry hadn't walked in? Would she have let him… completely? She hadn't ever…

Did Draco know? He had assumed, back during the Auction. He had asked for 35,000 galleons, thinking that extra 5,000 to be necessary.

Another 5,000 would be added on if it could be proven that you were 'untouched.'

She closed her eyes, sneering at herself and her stupid, dark thoughts.

Walter checked in on her around 3PM, asking about the Golden Snidget pitch in the morning meeting. Hermione had completely forgotten about that part of her day. He was disappointed to hear that the project was delayed, but Hermione told him they should continue to move forward with it as much as possible.

She stayed thirty minutes later than normal, just to avoid seeing anyone as she left. There was a light on in Draco's office. She could see it flooding under the door as she pressed the button for the lift. The lift took forever to arrive and Hermione felt very vulnerable, out in the open. She counted the seconds, eyes flickering to Draco's door, praying it wouldn't open while she was standing here.

The lift arrived with a loud *ding* and she winced, jumping in, and punching the "door close" button twenty or so times.

She Apparated home, and walked the few blocks to her building. She turned the lock on the building's exterior door, and looked up to see Ginny sitting on the stairs to their floor.

Ginny jumped up, eyes wide, one hand on the railing and one hand at her neck.

Hermione stopped. She blinked up at her. The door closed behind her.

Ginny blinked back.

Hermione opened her mouth and no sound came out.

Ginny twitched her head, trying to hear her.

Hermione looked over Ginny's shoulder, her eyes distant. She closed her mouth. And looked at the stairs.

Ginny took a breath. And stopped. And looked at the wall. Another breath—and stopped.

Hermione pressed her lips together.

"Who kissed who?"

"Him. He kissed me."

Ginny nodded, trying to read her.

"How was it?"

"It was -- it was.... Yes. Good. It was.... Yes."

Ginny crossed her arms. Then dropped them. "Shall we get Chinese tonight?"

"Yes. Excellent."

~*~

Ginny hung up the phone with the Chinese place. She turned to Hermione.

"So he... I mean..." She frowned. "Harry said there was a desk involved?"

"Yes. Desk. Yes."

Ginny nodded. She bit the inside of her cheek.

~*~

“Was there tongue?”

“Yes.”

Ginny nodded and Hermione started washing dishes.

~*~

Hermione opened a packet of soy sauce.

“Was it sweet? Or... slow?”

“No. I’d use the word aggressive.”

Ginny nodded and bit down on her egg roll.

~*~

“Did he tell you how he felt, or were you able to connect—?”

“We were arguing.”

“Hm.” Ginny turned on the TV.

~*~

“Groping?”

“Not really, no.”

Ginny snapped the fortune cookie in half.

~*~

Ginny left her alone after dinner. She lay in bed that night, twisting and punching her pillow until finally she gave into her restless mind and just let it run.

What would she say to him tomorrow? Did she *have* to say anything?

Perhaps this co-worker thing was a bad idea. Maybe she'd write to Mathilda and see if her position had been filled yet.

She still needed to chastise him about using her name to start up the company.

Why did she have to touch him after he asked her not to? Why did she do that?

What was her outfit tomorrow? Was it too revealing? She'd need to check.

She'd touched his cheek, and he'd grabbed her hip. He'd started to push her back, down onto her desk… then what?

What did Harry really think?

What were the actual legal ramifications of that Love Contract. She'd need to check.

Would it happen again? Or would it never happen again? Which was worse?

How would she sit in a board room with him, talking about werewolves and Wizengamot trials.

She wondered if she kissed like she was a virgin…

~*~

She climbed into Ginny's bed at 3AM. She started from the beginning.

She told her about her discovery that he'd used her name to garner respect and business deals. She told her about the dress, and the hair, and the Golden Snidgets, and finally the kiss.

Ginny gasped in all the right places, and groaned at Draco's stupidity, and giggled at Hermione's insolence. She pried the details from her, making Hermione blush and stumble. She asked what it felt like, and where his hands were, and what do you mean "noises," and would you have let him?

Ginny had to be up at 5AM for practice, so Hermione finally let her drift off, apologizing to her. Hermione got about an hour of sleep.

She dreamt of the balcony overlooking the Malfoy Gardens. She stood at the railing, looking over the pond. Draco approached her from behind and she turned to see him in his black robes with silver accents, and she looked down at herself to find her white gown from New Year's.

He smiled at her and took her hand, and when she looked up, they were standing in the gazebo. She had a bouquet of silver flowers in her hand. She turned to see Ginny in a blue dress, reaching to take her flowers for her.

She woke up smiling at Ginny's ceiling, bed empty, the sound of the shower running. Then she cried.

~*~

She got it out of her system.

No, she didn't have all the answers. No, she didn't know what challenges she would face today with Draco. But she put on her purple dress, her matching heels, hid her dark circles and marched into the office.

She could feel her heartbeat in her ears as the elevator doors opened. But then Melody smiled at her, bid her good morning, and she gained her focus back.

She got to her office, and almost shut the door behind her, but realized she had no reason to. She left it open, feeling vulnerable, but at least she would be able to see or hear him coming.

The first hour of her day was quiet. Walter brought in her mail and Hermione responded to several letters. She tried her best not to jump when she heard footsteps, or the rumble of a male voice.

Blaise entered her office, pouting. She looked up at him and watched him throw himself in her guest chair like a child.

"I don't want to do the interviews. Please do them for me?" He frowned and rubbed his hand over his face.

"The interviews for the Wizengamot Relations position?" He nodded. "Why are you conducting them?"

"Because Draco didn't want to reschedule them – sorry, *Mr. Malfoy.*" Blaise rolled his eyes. "Will you do them with me?"

She frowned at him. "Why are you in charge?"

"Beats me!" Blaise slouched down in the chair. "He told me to do the interviews while he was out."

Hermione stared at him. "Dra—Malfoy's out of the office today?"

"Mm-hm." Blaise played with the sleeve of his robes.

She gazed over his shoulder, mind working. Why was he out? Was he sick? Was he avoiding her? This was a business for Merlin's sake, he needed to be here!

"The first one is at eleven. Will you please do them with me? If you don't, then I'm likely to hire the first good-looking woman who walks through those doors."

She scowled at him, knowing he was telling the truth. "Fine.

Hermione spent the next thirty minutes reviewing the duty statement and the submitted applications.

She and Blaise set up in the conference room, deciding on a list of questions that they would take turns asking. Blaise didn't seem like he was going to be taking notes at all, so Hermione resigned herself to be the note-taker.

After the first two interviews, Blaise had one of the interns bring them lunch in the conference room. Hermione wasn't really a big fan of using interns like that, or using company funds like that, but Blaise rolled his eyes and said he would pay out of pocket.

She was poking at her salad, moving the croutons around when Blaise spoke up.

"Why did you speak at Draco's trial?"

She turned to him. He was watching her, picking at the bread on his sandwich.

"It was the right thing to do." She was getting tired of those words….

He narrowed his eyes at her. "And what does that mean?" He pushed a piece of sourdough between his lips.

"I… didn't think it was fair, what the Wizengamot was charging him with. He was the only student going through trial and –"

"He was the only student to try to kill Albus Dumbledore."

She looked up at him. He chewed, watching her.

"And he failed. He lowered his wand. Harry saw it."

Blaise lifted a brow at her. "So that explains why Harry Potter testified," he said, and she waited for the "but…"

"When we were captured by Snatchers – Ron, Harry and me – we were taken to Malfoy Manor," she said, looking down at her salad. "And he refused to identify us." She stabbed at a tomato. "I don't think that type of person should be locked in Azkaban."

The image of Draco turning from her tortured body, the sound of his gasp –

"And if it was someone else?" he said, and she looked to him. "Say if it had been Gregory Goyle who had been asked to identify you. And he said he wasn't sure."

Blaise's eyes were sparkling, and in that moment, she knew. She wasn't fooling him one bit.

She swallowed. "I would have testified for Goyle then, had the Wizengamot chosen to try him."

He grinned at her. "Because it's 'the right thing to do,'" he said, and popped another piece of bread into his mouth.

She nodded and he smirked. She could feel her face heat, so she watched him pull his sandwich apart. Such an interesting way to eat…

"What's the deal with you and Daphne?"

His fingers paused, and she looked up to see the grin disappear from his face. She felt like she was asking too much, suddenly.

"We… used to date." He looked down at his sandwich, placing his pulled piece back down.

"Oh," she said. "Difficult breakup, I presume?"

"Aren't they all?" He gave a small smile, before it disappeared.

She thought she could read guilt on his features, and she imagined what it would be like to be in a relationship with Blaise Zabini, the most incorrigible flirt she'd ever known. She took a stab in the dark.

"You cheated on her?" She kept her face nonjudgmental.

He snapped his eyes to her, and she was wrong. He pressed his lips together.

"The opposite, actually." Blaise swallowed, folded and scrunched his wrapper, stood, and excused himself.

She closed her eyes, tossing down her fork, remembering that she should never presume anything about Slytherins. They were far more complicated than she'd ever imagined.

~*~

She and Blaise finished the interviews, and she drafted up her notes for Draco. There were more interviews scheduled for Thursday, which she assumed Draco would be present for.

Madame Michele was a terror that night. Nothing Hermione did was correct, and the list of notes for her to work on was outrageous. It was her fifth lesson. She was now halfway done and she didn't feel like she was learning anything, or growing.

If Lucius Malfoy *really* wanted to torture her, he would have scheduled a test at the end of all of this.

On Wednesday, she repeated the steps from the day before. She layered on her clothing, her makeup, and her thick skin, and prepared to face Draco that day.

But he was still out of the office.

She approached his secretary around ten.

"Will Mr. Malfoy be in today?"

“I don’t believe so.” The girl looked up at her from her magazine, trying to slip it under some paperwork.

“Alright,” Hermione said. “Er… Has he cancelled the meeting with Mr. Townsend tonight?”

The girl looked at his schedule. “No,” she said. “It’s still on there.” She looked up at her. “I think the portkey is scheduled for this evening, just before.”

Hermione blinked at her. “Portkey? Oh, is he… out of town?”

“Yes, he’s in New York City. He scheduled a meeting out there.” The girl smiled up at her, twirling her hair.

Hermione couldn’t find words for a moment. A rare problem. “Would you be able to gather any notes he has on the Townsend meeting? I’m afraid I’m underprepared and I was hoping to meet with Malfoy today to catch up.”

“Absolutely,” the girl said. She pulled a sticky note and started writing. “I’ll send over the file.”

“Thank you,” she said, turning and wandering back to her office.

New York City. The only American she could think of was Noelle, and she really didn’t think he’d have a meeting with her after his insistence that she not contact her. Besides, she was pretty sure Noelle’s university was in California.

Who was in New York City?

~*~

She arrived fifteen minutes early for the dinner meeting with Mr. Townsend. She had fully prepared for Draco to not show up, just in case.

The hostess showed her to the table, and she was relieved to be the first one there.

She had read all about Mr. Townsend that afternoon. He was a half-blood widower in his late sixties who had gathered a small fortune from a potion-making business. He was quite outspoken about the Wolfsbane Potion being made available to those who could not pay for it.

At five minutes to seven, one of the hostesses showed a grey-haired man to her table. Hermione stood, smiling.

“Mr. Townsend?” She reached out her hand, confident that Madame Michele would approve of this.

“Yes. Hello, Miss Granger.” He shook her hand and gave her a warm smile. “I’m quite pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise, Mr. Townsend.” She took her seat again. “I’m so honored that you wanted to meet with us regarding the Werewolf Policy. Mr. Malfoy should be here, but I know he’s been away on a business trip.” She gestured to his empty chair.

The waiter took their drink order. Mr. Townsend ordered a scotch and Hermione took a cue to order a glass of wine.

And it was at that moment that she wondered if this dinner was to be on Malfoy Consulting’s dime. She blinked at the white tablecloth. She wondered if she had enough gold with her to cover this, and then later get reimbursed. Is that how business dinners worked? Or did Draco have an account with this restaurant that she could charge this to? She looked around. This *was* a wizarding restaurant, right? She didn’t have her Muggle credit card on her.

She tucked her worries away, resolving to excuse herself to go speak with the maître d’ later on. She turned her focus on Mr. Townsend, who was a very pleasant man.

They chatted about Hogwarts and books, slowly working their way towards werewolves.

It was ten minutes past seven when she decided it was time to start the conversation without Draco. She had just begun to discuss their current progress with Mr. Townsend when a familiar voice froze her own.

“So sorry to be this late.”

She looked up to find Draco Malfoy, smiling lightly at Mr. Townsend. She watched as Draco apologized, and Mr. Townsend stood to shake his hand. She was stuck, deciding if she should stand as well. Was that necessary? Damn you, Madame Michele. Why did she never learn anything useful?

He looked excellent. Beyond excellent. He looked delicious.

Hermione blinked and grabbed her water glass as Draco took the seat next to her, across from Mr. Townsend.

She watched him make small talk, trying to neutralize her expression. He smiled, and worked with his hands, and ordered Firewhisky – wizarding restaurant after all – and played the gracious, but late, host. Hermione watched him. And she tried not to watch him.

Once the conversation swayed back to werewolves, Draco gestured for her to take lead. She realized he had not looked at her once.

She blinked at him and turned to Mr. Townsend, starting up where they left off. She worked through the timeline of events, and their current struggles. Draco would chime in every so often and she managed to only shiver once at his voice.

Draco ordered a few appetizers for the table, and Hermione took the time to look over her menu. They strayed away from the Policy for a bit as Mr. Townsend chatted with Draco about mutual acquaintances, and Hermione read the menu.

“And Marcus Flint! You were close with him at Hogwarts, yes?”

Hermione flinched. She took a breath and looked up at Mr. Townsend. He was smiling, as if the memory of Marcus Flint was bright and happy.

She looked over at Draco just in time to see him smile and say, "Yes, he was my Quidditch captain for several years." She had to look closely to see the strain around his eyes.

She picked up her wine glass.

"Marcus was actually the one to tell me about the Policy." Mr. Townsend smiled, and Hermione drank deeply. "He said 'Geoffrey, have you heard what Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger are up to?'" Mr. Townsend – Geoffrey – chuckled.

Hermione pressed her lips together. She felt a bit nauseous.

"He was an excellent apprentice. Mighty fine potioneer."

And it clicked. Marcus Flint had brewed that potion himself. He'd been an apprentice to Mr. Townsend, who had dedicated his life to helping people by making potions. How terribly sad. She sucked in a breath and tried to breathe the tension out.

"That was so kind of him to recommend the Policy to you," she said. She smiled and heard Draco's knuckle pop on her right.

She took the opportunity to steer the conversation back, and away from Marcus Flint. The waiter came and took their order. From her cursory glance as the menu's prices, she was quite glad Draco was here to cover the bill.

Once the waiter disappeared, Mr. Townsend took his napkin off his lap.

"Excuse me, I'm going to find the restroom."

She felt cold dread twist in her chest. Oh, Mr. Townsend, please don't do this…

Every step he took away from the table tightened her stomach more and more. Hermione didn't dare look at Draco. She reached for her wine glass and almost knocked it over. She righted it and brought it to her lips.

She placed it down on the table. She waited three seconds and brought it back to her lips.

She could hear him breathing next to her.

"How was New York?"

She looked over at him. He was staring at the salt and pepper shaker. She saw his jaw tighten. Then release.

"Excellent."

He didn't look at her. And she was almost grateful, not sure what she would do if he turned his eyes on her.

“A potential client?” She ran her eyes along his jawline, resting her gaze on those lips.

“No,” he said. He cleared his throat. “Personal appointment.”

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry, I didn’t meant to pry—“

He shook his head at the salt shaker, implying that she wasn’t prying.

“Blaise and I handled the interviews.” She wished they could just sit in silence but apparently she wasn’t going to let them. “Some excellent candidates.”

He nodded.

“Will you be in the office tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

Mr. Townsend returned. And she could breathe again.

They had a lovely rest of the evening. Her dinner was delicious, Mr. Townsend kept the mood light, and he even pledged half of their fundraising goal. She was shocked.

Mr. Townsend and Draco argued over the bill, which she thought was adorable. When she stood from the table to use the restroom, both men stood for her. How precious.

When they left, shaking Mr. Townsend’s hand and scheduling a follow up meeting at the office next week, Draco gestured for her to exit before him.

She didn’t realize how accustomed she was to the feeling of his hand on her lower back, guiding her, until it was gone.

~*~

Draco, Blaise and she sat down on Thursday morning to discuss the interviews from earlier that week.

She triplicated her notes from Tuesday and handed a set to each of them. The woman who Hermione felt the most strongly about was Blaise’s least favorite, of course.

“But I do want to share with you one of her answers. It was quite impressive really,” Hermione said, flipping through the notes. “Ah, here. We asked ‘name a time you had differences or a misunderstanding with a co-worker and how the two of you resolved the issue.’ And she said that she likes to come at problems from multiple viewpoints. She’ll take a moment to try to figure out where the person is coming from, put herself in their shoes, and accept the fact that she may be wrong.”

Hermione looked up from her notes to find Draco looking directly at her. She blinked. She hadn’t see his eyes since Monday, since right before he kissed her. They were hot then, and filled with promises.

His eyes were neutral and even now. She watched for any of his facial ticks. None.

“Er,” she started, “She also said she treats every situation in the office as ‘business, not personal’ and knows that office friendships must be sacrificed at times for the good of the client.”

She looked up again and Draco’s eyes were still on her. The same.

“She was dreadfully boring,” Blaise whined. “And I felt personally attacked in the whole ‘not everyone is going to be friends’ part of it.”

“Alright,” Draco said. “I’ll keep her in mind. Blaise and I will do the interviews today, so that he can properly compare and contrast all the candidates I didn’t get to see.” He stood from the table, picking up her notes.

Blaise would do the interviews today? She frowned. Blaise who didn’t take a single note and judged people on their appearance? She opened her mouth to argue and Draco left the room.

She huffed.

~*~

She had his secretary check his schedule for Friday and find her an opening. While she would truly love to discuss the manipulative use of her name, the current atmosphere was a bit too… volatile for that discussion.

She wanted to give Walter an opportunity to pitch the Golden Snidget idea again. He also had two other portfolios he’d been working on, and one of them was quite interesting. He had drafted a proposal for Hermione and her branch to start a consulting service for Muggle-born families entering Hogwarts, giving counsel to the parents and starting a bit of a “catch-up” program for the students.

Hermione loved it. It was exactly the kind of work she would be interested in. She thought on Arthur Weasley showing her parents around Diagon Alley, watching her father become overwhelmed and watching her mother’s awe. She would love to assist Muggle-born families with the transition process.

About thirty minutes before the impromptu meeting, Walter came into her office.

“Just got this,” he said, waving a piece of paper. “We’ll have to reschedule next week.”

She frowned as she took the page from him. It was a memo from Draco’s secretary, apologizing that Draco was actually unavailable for their 3PM.

She had just watched the girl check his schedule a few hours ago, finding that time slot open.

“Oh, well.” Walter shrugged. “I’ll keep polishing it and we’ll try again next week.” He left.

Hermione wandered over to her doorway, and leaned against the frame. Draco’s door was closed, and there was a light on.

Did he really have a conflict? Or did he just cancel their one-on-one?

~*~

The weekend was slow. Nothing terribly exciting happened at Cornerstone, and she found herself wondering if she should think about giving it up. And then she found herself wondering if she should keep working there just to spite Draco.

On Monday the *Witch Weekly* issue came out. They had chosen the periwinkle dress for the cover, and several other poses and outfits filled the center pages. Hermione was quite pleased, and she got a lovely note from Pansy, letting her know how excited she was.

She stepped out of the lifts on Monday and almost stumbled to see Draco at the front desk, reading through something while Melody opened mail. He turned to head back to his office, and his eyes landed on her.

She nodded at him and continued to her office, trying to shake off the dead stare he had given her.

At the Monday Senior Consultant meeting, she brought in Walter's proposals. It seemed that Wentworth had followed her lead from the week before and had drafted his own packet to pass out to everyone, proposing his next steps for acquiring more businesses in Diagon Alley.

When it came to her, she handed out two packets.

"Walter and I have been working on revising the Golden Snidget proposal, adjusting the budget, and laying down a more workable timeframe to hopefully move up the project into this quarter instead of next –"

"I thought I already shot this down."

Hermione looked at Draco. His eyes were still dead.

"You did. That's why we revised it. For your review."

He closed the packet, opened his mouth to speak, and she cut him off.

"Which means you take it, you read it fully, you think on it, and you come back to me with a decision," she said.

Her neck was warm. She thought she saw a flicker of life in his eyes, but it was gone before she could think on it. She took a breath.

"The next project I wanted to present is truly Walter's idea, and I think it's wonderful."

She went on to describe the Muggle-Born Integration Program, taking them through the packet. Once she was wrapping up, she turned to see Wentworth grinning, Mockridge glancing over the financial analysis, and Blaise doodling on the pages… as expected. Draco was frowning at the front cover. She finished, and he spoke up.

“So, this is the third project of your branch that will be fundraised, having no direct income from specific clients?”

She kept from rolling her eyes at him. “Some Muggle-born families may very well be able to afford the program’s fees, but yes, I have projected needing a sort of ‘scholarship fund’ for the Muggle-Born Integration –“

“So, again, your department’s spending will be putting us in the red, without a projected future income for any of your projects.”

She met his cold eyes, trying to keep the heat out of her own.

“Isn’t that the point of fundraising?”

“Three projects at the same time?”

“The Muggle-Born Integration Program won’t even be needed until closer to July, when Hogwarts letters go out. That’s definitely to begin next quarter.”

“This is a business, Granger.” He sat back in his chair, and his nonchalance irked her. “You are only trying to spend money instead of thinking of the profitability of your branch. While all of your causes would, of course, gather excellent publicity for M.C.G. –“

“Isn’t that what I’m here for? Public opinion?” she shot at him.

Blaise lifted a brow, suddenly interested.

She definitely saw a fire in Draco’s eyes that time. He clicked his jaw shut. And the fire died.

“Keep thinking of ideas that will increase profitability.”

She took a deep breath. Draco dismissed the meeting. And she moved as calmly as she could back to her office.

Part of her knew he was absolutely correct. She knew better than anyone about this company’s financial situation. But how much longer could she work only on the werewolf project. She was bored with the work she was doing, and her relationship with Draco had her on edge at all times.

This was becoming… impossible.

~*~

On Tuesday afternoon, she crossed the office floor, folded piece of paper in hand. She approached his secretary – whose name, she was embarrassed to admit, she still didn’t know – and checked to see if he was in a meeting.

The girl told her no, eyes shifting to the side, but he’d asked not to be disturbed unless it was of huge importance.

Hermione nodded, and knocked on his door.

A moment's pause.

"Come in."

Hermione took a deep breath and opened the door. He sat behind his desk reading through Wentworth's proposal from yesterday's meeting. He leaned back in his chair, comfortable. His eyes flipped up to her, then back down to the paperwork.

"Yes?"

She shut the door behind her. He looked up at her again, eyes flickering between her and the closed door. She swallowed.

She walked toward his desk, fingers playing with the one-page letter she'd written up. She had chosen the outfit Pansy had penned in for Friday, but it was her favorite of the week. Flowy, knee-length navy skirt with a grey button-up. She wanted to get a chance to wear it. She had her hair pulled into a sleek ponytail, controlling the curls like Pansy taught her.

She placed the letter on his desk. "I wanted to…I need to give you my notice."

He stared at the letter and clenched his jaw.

"I've started to feel uncomfortable here and I don't think my comfort will improve over time. My work is starting to be affected. I had unreal expectations coming into this company, and I don't think it's going to work out. So I am giving you my two weeks' notice."

She clasped her hands in front of her, and bit the inside of her cheek as she watched him remain still.

"No."

She blinked at him. "No?"

"I do not accept." He returned to the paperwork in front of him, not sparing her a glance.

Hermione felt heat flushing her neck and she pursed her lips, biting back a few choice words.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I will gladly train my replacement. But my last day will be February 25th. I'll work until the end of that week, and leave that Friday."

He cracked his neck, tossed Wentworth's proposal across his desk, and stood from his chair. Her heart pounded. He looked up at her and his face was bored but his eyes were on fire.

He walked around his desk, grabbed up the folded paper she'd placed at the edge and opened it. He stood three paces from her, leaning on the edge of the desk. His eyes flew across the words.

“It doesn’t say anything in here about your boss sexually harassing you.” He looked up at her, scowling.

She swallowed. Oh, so they were going to talk about it now? “No. That is not my intention –“

“And what *is* your intention, Granger?” He crumpled the letter and tossed it to the side. He gripped the edge of the desk behind him, lifting his chin proudly. His cheeks were pink. “What is it you want?”

“I… I want to resign. Clearly.” She shook her head at him, not understanding.

“You’ll resign if I don’t… what?” He tilted his head at her.

“If nothing,” she laughed. She studied him. Jaw tight and knuckles turning white. “This isn’t blackmail, Draco –“

“*Draco,* again.” He stood tall, stepping off the desk. Now only two paces from her. “It’s been *months* since I’ve heard that.” She heard one of his knuckles pop and her breath left her. “I think the last time was in an alley, whispered into my ear as your fingers gripped my hair—“

She gasped and stepped backward.

“—or maybe it was on my balcony, you in a white dress, smiling at me like you knew what you were doing –“

“What are you talking about, Malfoy—“

“Nah-ah! Can’t take it back now. It’s *Draco,* again.” He stepped toward her, eyes flashing, breathing uneven. She stepped back, cursing the heels. Her chest was heavy and she felt like he’d let all the air out of the room. His eyes were dead seconds ago, and now they were burning.

“Do you *want* me to make a sexual harassment claim?” She laughed, shaky.

“I *want* you to be honest about why you're leaving, Granger.” He stepped forward again and she wished she could stop herself from retreating. “Brave little Gryffindor Golden Girl, let me kiss her, and doesn’t know how to take it back.”

She laughed even as she stepped backward again. “*I’m* the one who wants to take it back??” His grey eyes danced over her face, spots of pink high on his cheeks as her back landed against the wall. He had her pinned, again. Always pinning her. She snarled at him, “*Draco Malfoy,* calm and collected, never mixing business and personal, kissed an employee and now wants to be *punished* for it.”

His arms came up to the wall on either side of her. He stepped impossibly closer, and she could feel his chest against hers.

“Are you gonna punish me, Granger?” He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, and she could make out a smirk begging at the corner of his mouth.

She shivered. This was… not what she had intended. She could feel his breath in her mouth. She waited, feeling him sway into her and ebb away with every breath. She tilted her head back, waiting. His breath was heaving.

She found his eyes, dark and flashing, and waiting. Waiting for *her* to kiss *him*.

Goddamn him. She stood on her tiptoes, in her heels, and caught his lips with hers. He chased her mouth and murmured a "fuck" as he connected their hips. She gasped and he pushed into her mouth.

She heard herself moan, and one of his hands grabbed her waist, as he ground his hips against hers. The other moved to her neck. He grunted, and reached up, grabbing her ponytail, ripping the band from her hair.

"Never do this..." His voice was hoarse against her neck as her hair fell around them. He sucked on her neck and she shivered.

She felt him running his teeth along her skin, and she let her eyes drift close. His hand at her neck threaded through the hair behind her ear, curling his fingers against her scalp. She pressed her lips together, but the groan still poured out of her.

He gently pushed her knees apart with his right thigh. He was moving slowly on her lower half but ravishing her on her top half. She was gripping his arms, not sure what to do. She was panting. His knee came between hers, softly. Opening her. She could feel the hand on her hip starting to gather the material of her skirt, pulling it up.

She bit her lip. This was heaven. It was everything it was supposed to be. She felt his thigh rising higher, connecting with her center and she moaned, realizing that this was what she'd seen him do to Pansy in the Hogwarts corridors. This was what she'd dreamed about as a sixteen-year-old, what she'd wondered about.

She moved her hips against him, and electricity ran through her body as she came in contact with his thigh. She did it again. And again.

"Oh, god," she moaned and her hands slid up his shoulders and grabbed his hair. Perfect. She felt a tremor go through him and she pulled at his head, pulling him back from where he was attacking her neck. His lips were swollen and his breath caught when he saw her face. She reached up with her mouth again and he kissed her, running his hand down from her neck, down her chest, barely grazing her breast and she groaned against his mouth.

She felt the top buttons of her shirt opening, and the fabric of her skirt scraping against her thigh as his fingertips finally found skin.

He was going to have her naked in minutes and she wouldn't stop him. He wanted her, and she wouldn't stop him.

"You're driving me insane." He wheezed against her lips, eyes closed, pressing his forehead to hers. His right hand was rubbing circles on her upper thigh where the skirt had been pulled, his left was dipping into her shirt, reaching for her breast.

“Sorry...”

He chuckled, squeezing his eyes closed, biting his lip. He brushed against her breast, the fabric of her bra pushing against her. She gasped and he grabbed her thigh, pulling it up to his hip. She teetered on one heel, barely able to stay upright when she was on two.

His fingers roamed across her outer thigh, rounding down toward her backside, finding the fabric of her knickers. He kissed her. His fingers dipped under, and she snapped her eyes open.

He’d know. Soon he’d… be able to feel it, right? She panicked. As if he couldn’t already tell by the way she could barely touch him even as he undressed her.

This was something you warn a person about, right? Even if he already had guessed…

“I’m… I…”

He kissed her mouth again, sighing into her as he pulled her bra cup down.

“Wait, wait.” She gasped. “I’m … you were right...to assume, before. About the five additional.”

“What?” he whispered, his fingers growing closer to her core.

“It would have been 35,” she said, blushing.

“35?”

“35,000.” She gasped. His fingers stilled on her skin. His eyes snapped open to hers. “I’m…I haven’t…”

His mouth was open and panting. He squeezed his eyes shut, dropping his head on her shoulder.

“How?” It left his body like a laugh.

She didn’t know if she was to respond.

“I wanted you to know, before…”

Then she felt him remove his hand from her knickers. And it was like ice water.

He left his head on her shoulder, breathing mist on her neck, and placed his hand against the wall by her neck. He pulled his other hand out of her shirt.

He dropped his knee from where it had been pushing against her, rubbing her perfectly, and she almost whimpered.

He wasn’t going to continue. Because she was a virgin. He didn’t want her because she was a virgin?

She opened her mouth and no sound came out.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into her shoulder. “Things went too far.”

She swallowed, tears pricked her eyes. This wasn’t fair. She’d waited. She’d only dreamed of him. She hadn’t bothered with anyone else, and now he didn’t want her for it?

He lifted his head and placed his hand on her cheeks, lightly.

“Don’t leave.” His grey eyes moved back and forth between hers. “Don’t resign.” He swallowed. “I’ll be better. We’ll go back to how it was… before. I won’t ignore you or treat you any differently because of this.”

Back to before. Back to co-workers after this. After tasting it.

“Don’t leave.” His thumb brushed across her lip.

She could have nothing or she could have something. But he wouldn’t give her everything.

“Okay.”

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> I apologize for the delay! As a reward, this chapter has something you all have been aching for...
>
> Also, I chose to edit and post rather than respond to last chapter's comments first, but I feel like you'll forgive me.

He had bruised her. Marked her.

Hermione stared at the love bite on her neck, her hand pulling her hair back.

Claimed her.

She let her hair fall. She considered not covering it, remembering that he hadn't covered the marks she had left on him, but it still didn't make sense to her why he'd left them.

Then she thought of what people in the office might think if they saw. What Blaise might say…

She covered the love bite with a charm, and then even further with makeup.

She stood in the elevator up to M.C.G. on Wednesday morning, running through her head all the reasons she had tried to quit yesterday.

Her projects were getting shot down.

She wasn't getting the support she needed to pursue her ideas.

She was bored with the current project she was working on, and it was the *only* project she was allowed to work on.

Her boss was ignoring her and treating her like a nuisance.

Her boss was using her as a means for publicity.

She had a volatile relationship with her boss that had an unpredictability that had started to give her stomachaches.

She decided to leave out any sexual harassment claims from this list, due in part to the fact that she would hate to sound like a hypocrite. He kissed her first. Then she kissed him second.

She shook these thoughts from her mind before it could ask *Who would kiss third?*

The lift doors opened. She raised her eyes from the floor, steeling her expression, and her gaze landed on Draco, standing at the reception desk.

Her stomach twisted.

She watched his eyes lift to hers from the paperwork he was reading. He nodded in greeting and took a deep breath, calming. She wouldn't have noticed it a week ago, but she felt like she'd been synchronized with his breathing now, the way his exhale pushed into her mouth on her inhale –

She stepped out of the lift, not knowing what her face was doing, and turned right to walk to her office. He fell into step with her.

"Morning," he said.

She looked up at him and found a hand extending a coffee cup to her. She blinked at it. It was a to-go cup, with the name of a coffee shop around the corner.

"Mr. Townsend wants to come in to go over paperwork tomorrow. Finalize things."

She took the coffee cup from him, forgetting manners entirely and saying nothing in thanks. "Okay."

"Is just before lunch alright?"

"Yes." She stared at the cup in her hands. He could have checked her schedule with Walter.

They reached her door.

"I have some ideas for the remainder of the fundraising that we can go over when convenient for you."

She looked up at him. His face was still, eyes grey and neutral, but he wasn't cold like before.

"Excellent," she said.

They stood there for a moment, in front of her office door, staring at each other, before he nodded and turned to walk back to his office. She might have been mistaken, but she could almost see his eyes slide over her neck before he turned away. She brought her free hand to her bruise, and her coffee to her lips as she watched him walk away. Perfect ratio of sweetener to cream.

Which "before" did he mean, when he said they'd go back to before?

~*~

Not an hour later, once Hermione was settled and finally invested in her work, did he come again.

"Granger."

She jumped at his voice and double-jumped when she looked up to see him in her doorway.

"Yes?"

"Are you free?"

She blinked at him. "Yes?"

He entered her office and her heart stopped when he started closing the door… but then he left it cracked, a sliver of the rest of the office visible.

Oh, thank god.

"Alright," he said, walking to her desk, pushing his hair back. He tossed something – some paperwork – on her desk and took one of her guest chairs. "Let's go over this."

Hermione had the horrifying thought that the portfolio he'd just tossed on her desk contained the Love Contract or the Conflict of Interest or any number of unpleasant things.

He scooted his chair forward, and opened the portfolio.

"The Snidget Sanctuary," he said, running his eyes over the paper. "Have they provided actual numbers of decline, or just estimations?"

He looked up at her, and blinked quickly, like he was clearing his vision.

She took a moment to figure out what exactly was happening before she cleared her throat and responded, "Those are estimations based on last year's decline."

"So, the first thing would be to send our people out to get actual numbers, based on this year, and also, projected decline for the next year." He looked down at the paperwork, and Hermione finally put two-and-two together. It was her Snidget proposal, with notes scratched all over it.

He'd reviewed it.

“Your revised timeline and projected budget is much more workable than your first, but to cut costs dramatically, I’d like to send only Walter out to Somerset.” He looked up at her to gauge her reaction.

She could feel herself about to pout –

“He could go out as early as next week,” Draco said. “But if you go with him, you’ll start to miss several important dates and deadlines for the Werewolf Policy.”

Hermione clicked her jaw shut. *This is what compromise was, Hermione…*

She didn’t like it one bit.

“Yes,” she said. “If we can start as early as next week, then that would be wonderful.”

He nodded at her. “I still think setting the court date in March is too ambitious.” She pursed her lips. “I anticipate that the Wizengamot will be quite fed up with us by the end of the Werewolf Policy proceedings, and to jump on them with another project not weeks after our first might cause some backlash.”

“But they should be impartial,” Hermione said, frowning. “They should look at each case as separate entities.”

Draco raised a brow at her. “They should…” His *but they don’t* didn’t need to be said.

He shifted in his seat, trying to cross his legs unsuccessfully. He looked down at the chair.

“I’ll need to get you better chairs. These are awful.” She watched him move to a different position.

“I like these chairs.”

“You must hate your guests, then.”

“I don’t have guests, really,” she said. “The only person who sits there is Blaise.”

“Oh, then we’ll leave them.” He grinned up at her.

She met his eyes, warmer than usual. She was unsure what it was they were doing. Her lips twitched at his joke, but she didn’t understand where this part of him was coming from.

She decided to move the conversation back to the Snidgets. “So, we’ll plan on April for a court date?”

Draco nodded. They moved on to discuss her fundraising goals.

“I think it would help to get the Golden Snidgets case into the public view,” Draco said. “Not a lot of people know their history, or their relation to Quidditch. We could get more eyes on their case with some assistance from the handful of Quidditch players we know.” He looked at her carefully.

She raised her brow, pondering the idea, and suddenly said, “Oh! I wonder if I could get in contact with Viktor!”

Her brain started forming around this plan, thinking of how interesting it could be to have a Quidditch spokesperson, someone to interview. She looked up to Draco and found his lips tight.

“I was referring to the Weasleys, but, yes,” Draco said, rubbing his jaw, “Krum could be useful, too.”

Oh, of course, Ron and Ginny. She hadn’t really spoken to Ron since he wrote her that nasty note a few weeks back.

“What is it you’re thinking?” she asked.

“I think going public with the project might help,” Draco said. “Get Skeeter to do a write-up. Even see if Lovegood’s paper would be interested.”

Hermione nodded. This was wonderful. “You know who else was really quite interested in the Snidgets? Rolf Scamander,” she said. “He would probably love to bring attention to this as well.”

She looked up at him with wide, excited eyes, and saw him still, clench his jaw, then release it.

“Wonderful.” He stood. “Go ahead and make some initial contact, and make arrangements for Walter to head out next week.” He grabbed up his notes and headed to her door.

“Thank you, Draco.” She bit her lip as soon as it left her mouth.

He turned to her, nodded, and left.

Later in the day, Walter brought in her mail. He continued to separate the personal letters from the business ones, trying not to read through the personal ones once he was able to distinguish between the two. He gave her an interoffice memo that let everyone know that the Governors of Hogwarts were hosting a Valentine’s Day Ball that Saturday night, and all of M.C.G. had been invited. She rolled her eyes at it, despising the celebration of Valentine’s Day just as much as the actual day. Harry would be out of town this weekend visiting Ginny at her match in Canada, so she couldn’t count on either of them to go with her to this thing.

She started flipping through the fan mail and personal letters first, and landed on a beautiful burnt orange envelope with loopy scrawl across the front.

Miss Hermione Granger

Hermione frowned at it. She flipped it open and her eyes grew wider and wider.

My dearest Hermione!

I am just finally back in the U.K. from the holidays, and I would love to take you to lunch! I need to congratulate you on all your success with Malfoy Consulting Group!

I've been dying to pick your brain on a charity I'm beginning back home. Please let me know if you are free at the end of this week!

Love to you,
Katya

Hermione dropped the letter on her desk, and ran her hands over her face.

Are you fucking serious.

~*~

Thursday evening, Hermione's dance class took a surprising turn. A familiar tune played out of the gramophone, and Miss Truesdale announced that they would be working on the French Waltz that evening.

The French Waltz, coincidentally, was the only pure-blood dance Hermione knew. It was the one she'd learned for the Yule Ball, memorized and practiced – desperate to not embarrass herself on Viktor Krum's arm. The one in which she'd momentarily spun around Draco, hands not touching, and therefore, the one she had ingrained in her head for the past five years.

Not that she told Miss Truesdale this. She simply nodded her head as she was shown the formation, and how to count a waltz, and how to stay on the balls of her feet. She turned the wrong way few times just for show, but by the end of the lesson, Miss Truesdale had a small look of satisfaction lifting her features.

That night, she let herself into her flat, feeling like there was nothing she'd rather do than just lay down, read, and fall asleep.

Harry stood from the couch as she entered.

"Oh, hello."

"Hey, Hermione." He rubbed his palms on his trousers.

"I thought Ginny was in Canada?"

"She is," he said, scratching his ear. "I let myself in."

"Oh." She set her purse down, and kicked off her heels. "What's wrong?"

"Er, nothing's wrong." Harry pushed his glasses up and started to twist his fingers around themselves. "Can we sit?"

Hermione stared at him. What had she done? Was this about Draco? Was he finally telling her his opinions? Was someone hurt? Had something awful happened?

She sat at the dining room table, legs feeling quite wobbly. Harry sat across from her. He took a deep breath, and the words came tumbling out of his mouth.

“I’m going to ask Ginny to marry me.”

Hermione felt her brows lift, but that was the only part of her moving. She couldn’t feel her heart beating, or her lungs expanding. She stared at him.

Smile. You were supposed to smile when this happened.

Hermione smiled. She giggled. “Harry!”

Harry’s worried face evaporated and he grinned at her.

“When!?”

“Monday,” he said. “Valentine’s Day.”

She brought her hands to her mouth. “Why were you so nervous to tell me?”

“I dunno,” Harry laughed. He rubbed his eyes. “You’re the last person on my list – besides Ginny, of course – and I’m just so relieved that it’s half done now.”

The last person…

“Who else?”

He looked down at the table. “I went to see Arthur this week. And last weekend, I went to Ireland.”

To see Ron. Hermione nodded. He went to a different country before seeing her. Then she remembered the awkward and horrifying lunch date they’d had last week, when he’d walked in on her and Draco. He’d asked her to lunch that day. But unfortunately, Hermione had made it all about her.

She bit her cheek. “Which of those conversations was harder?” She laughed.

“Ron, surprisingly.” Harry nodded his head. “He’s well, by the way.”

“Excellent.”

“He’s… Well, he’s seeing someone.” Harry looked up at her. Hermione swallowed.

“Yes, he told me at Christmas.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. He scratched his face. “I met her. She’s really nice.”

Hermione took a slow breath. “That’s great.”

Harry looked back at her. “Anyway, I’m glad you know about me and Ginny.” Harry smiled.

Hermione nodded, smiling as brightly as she could. “Do you have the ring on you?”

Harry blushed and pulled the box out of his robes.

Hermione grinned and nodded and laughed and giggled and asked how he was going to do it, would he be romantic or spontaneous, how did Arthur react, what restaurant were they going to. She listened to him and the weight in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

Harry was getting married, Ron was dating a nice girl, and Hermione was playing grab-ass with Draco Malfoy once a week.

~*~

Friday morning, Hermione stared at her planned outfit for that day, and frowned. There was something slightly off about it. It was like the colors didn’t go together, or maybe it was the hem of the skirt.

She thought about calling Pansy over to figure out what was wrong with her, but she was in Italy, designing a Debutant Ball dress for the daughter of the Italian Minister of Magic. It was a big deal for her, and Hermione didn’t think “lunch date with Katya Viktor” qualified as an emergency.

Draco met her with coffee again, like he had on Thursday morning as well. It seemed like this was going to be a habit. He would take the fifteen seconds they had to pace to her office door to fill her in on anything pressing, any meetings they should take, and then leave her at her office, staring after him as he headed back to his own.

She escaped from the office at ten minutes to noon, and headed to the only wizarding café near the M.C.G. office. She’d never been there but Katya said it was “to *die* for.”

Katya was early. Earlier than her, which was hard to do. She stood from the table with a bright smile and silky arms and enveloped Hermione in the friendliest hug she’d ever had from a stranger.

Well. It didn’t seem Katya knew anything about Hermione’s kisses with her on-again-off-again lover…

“My dearest!” Katya pulled back from the hug and gripped Hermione’s upper arms. “You look splendid!” Katya’s eyes ran over Pansy’s outfit for today, and Hermione bit back some comment that Madame Michele would describe as “not taking a compliment.”

Katya ran her fingers over the fabric on Hermione’s shoulder. “Oh, I wish Pansy Parkinson would build for me! She is so talented!” Hermione almost laughed, remembering Pansy’s distain for the Bulgarian girl. Katya continued, “And, of course, the clothes are nothing if the right witch is not in them!” Bright white teeth. And then Katya’s hand was touching Hermione’s face lovingly.

Hermione figured out a way to thank her and slither out of her grasp so they could sit, getting the attention off of her.

They chatted a bit about their holidays, ordered drinks from the sweet old witch who ran the place, and fixed their tea and coffee the way they liked it. Katya, she observed, used exactly the right amount of milk and the right number of sugar cubes, as suggested by Madame Michele. Her spoon did not clink the cup as she stirred. But then again, neither did Hermione's.

"Oh, I'm so glad we had the chance to catch up! I've been *dying* to sit down with you ever since we met – well, before that!"

Hermione was struck with the same thought she had when she'd seen Katya in the papers with Draco: She smiles too much.

"I'm also glad we got a chance to really meet each other," Hermione said. "Will you be in town more often?" Hermione couldn't stop herself as the next words poured out of her. "At least through Monday. Valentine's Day?"

"Oh, no!" Katya pouted. "I leave for Bulgaria tomorrow. I won't be back until March at the earliest."

"Oh," Hermione said. She raised her brows as innocently as possible. "I would have thought you'd be spending Valentine's Day with Draco."

Why, Hermione. Why.

Katya waved a manicured hand, and said, "Oh, there was no need for that. We ended our arrangement a few months ago." Katya brought her teacup to her lips, hovering the saucer just below in a way Madame Michele would approve.

Hermione's eye twitched as she watched her. "Arrangement?"

"Yes, the dating thing." Katya set her cup and saucer down, taking a look around the shop.

Hermione stared at her. Perhaps there was a Bulgarian-to-English translation issue at work here?

"Do you mean you broke up?"

Katya looked at her. "Broke up?" She seemed just as confused as Hermione was. Then it was like a light went off in Katya's head. "Oh! How strange!" She laughed. Hermione thought this was no laughing matter. "I thought Draco would have told you, since you're so close."

Hermione waited, ignoring her own confusion about Draco and her being "close."

Katya continued, looking at Hermione with kind eyes. "Draco and I had a relationship for the papers. We weren't actually involved." She leaned back. "I'm surprised he never told you."

Hermione clenched her jaw. "As am I!" She bit out a laugh that sounded a little hysterical. "I'm afraid I still don't understand."

“He needed an exciting and desirable social life once he left Azkaban, to rehabilitate his image. So, we had an arrangement.” Katya shrugged and flagged down the waiter.

They ordered and Hermione simmered. Once the waiter had left, Hermione turned to Katya. “I don’t mean to be blunt, but didn’t you feel used?”

“Oh, no,” Katya said, smiling. “In fact, I think I got the better end of the bargain some days.”

Hermione watched Katya. This woman who she had respected and hated and envied, and Hermione begged her to please explain.

Katya looked around, lowered her voice and said, “I have a fiancé in Bulgaria.” She pointed to a ring that Hermione hadn’t noticed. It was plain, yet lovely. “He’s a Muggle.”

Hermione’s eyes snapped to her, waiting for the punchline.

“My father… He doesn’t approve.” Katya frowned at the table.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at her. “I’m sorry, I thought your mother was…. I had heard that you were half-blooded.”

“She was Muggle-born. She was still a witch. My father sees a difference.”

And like that, a vacuum had sucked all the confidence out of this girl at the mention of her father. Her posture slouched and she bit her lip. Katya looked up at Hermione and shook it off.

“I needed a pretense. While Andrei and I saved our money, I needed a reason for my father not to set me up with the Durmstrang graduates, or Undersecretary to the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.” She rolled her eyes. “But now Andrei and I are eloping next month.” She smiled.

“So… Andrei was alright with this arrangement?” Hermione tried to keep the judgment out of her voice. She tried. “You kissing another man for the papers?”

Katya laughed. “The first time was easy. But the second kiss, he did have a bit of a problem with.” Hermione listened to her laugh bounce around the café as she remembered the image of Draco pushing Katya against the bricks, hands in her hair and on her hip. Katya’s voice broke her out of it. “But Draco asked permission. He said he needed something more, just once.”

“Why?” Hermione’s voice was quiet. She knew the answer, but she desperately needed to hear it.

Katya batted her lashes as her, casting her eyes to the side quickly, then back to her. “For his father.”

Hermione swallowed, hearing the words she had memorized…

Going on dates with that Bulgarian half-blood every time the two of you are pictured together in the paper.

Hermione felt ill. The waiter placed her salad down in front of her, and Katya began rambling about the charity she would be starting that year. Hermione kept to one word responses, not trusting her voice.

As they left each other, promising to keep in touch, Hermione turned and said, “Oh, Katya?”

The girl turned, hair moving in slow motion behind her.

“Did Draco ever give you a gift? A book, giftwrapped?”

Katya blinked at her. “No. I don’t remember anything like that.”

Hermione’s blood boiled as she smiled at the Bulgarian girl. She waved a jaunty hand and spun on her heel, marching back to her office.

~*~

The lift doors opened, and Blaise was leaning at the reception desk, flirting with Melody. When Melody saw her exiting the lift, she straightened and her smile disappeared. Blaise turned to Hermione and said something, but she ignored him, headed to the back office on the left.

His door was ajar, so she didn’t bother asking the secretary anything. She marched in, closing the door behind her.

He looked up at her, and she could see his eyes flicker towards the closed door. He swallowed.

“Yes, Granger?” He looked back down to his paperwork.

“I just had a very interesting date.”

Draco’s eyes snapped to her. He looked her over head to toe. “Oh?”

“With Katya.”

He held her eyes. “Oh.” He gave a tiny shrug. “Didn’t know she was in town.”

She fumed. She pulled her wand from her robes, and muttered, “*Silencio*.”

“Don’t—“ Draco clenched his jaw. “Please don’t silence the room.”

“But I want to yell at you.” She hissed.

“If I know the room is silenced and the door is shut, this will be harder for me,” he bit out, color rising in his cheeks.

She almost lost her breath, but that shivering thread of rage in her won out. She returned the sound to the room, and took a breath.

“Where are the books?”

He stared at her. “Books?”

“The books—!” She stopped herself, and adjusted her volume. “The giftwrapped books.”

He shifted in his chair. “If they were gifts, then I’m sure I gave them away—“

“Katya never received a book. She told me today.” Hermione paced a bit. “I giftwrapped books for your *girlfriend* and now she’s *not* your *girlfriend* and never *was* and she never received the books!” She lowered her voice. “I want to know what happened to them.”

He studied her, lifting a brow. “You’re truly upset about those books?”

“Yes!” She adjusted her volume. “I’m *livid* about the books,” she hissed. She made up for volume by beginning to gesture wildly.

"Did I not purchase the books?"

"Yes, you did --"

"So after the transaction, was I not free to do with them whatever I please?"

She glared at him, watching him steeple his fingers, elbows on his desk.

“I spent valuable time and effort wrapping up those books for *Katya*, and now I hear that *Katya* never received those books. So, I want to know what the point was!” she whisper-yelled.

“I’m sorry,” Draco began, with that touch of superiority that had her fuming, “I was under the impression that gift-wrapping at Cornerstone was a service provided to the customer.” He smirked at her. “I wasn’t aware one needed to declare the recipient upon requesting giftwrapping.”

Her jaw dropped. Her eyes narrowed. “You know what, Malfoy?” she hissed. “Now that you mention it, giftwrapping is *not* a free service. It actually costs two sickles.” She leaned her hands on his desk. “I had forgotten about it because no one else has ever been *idiotic* enough to ask for a *book* to be wrapped!”

Her volume had risen, so she took a slow breath while she glared at him. He remained in his chair, holding her eyes. Then he reached into his robes pocket, pulling out a pouch.

“Two sickles, you say?”

She gasped. “Don’t you *dare* try to *pay* me.”

“I’m not paying you, I’m paying Cornerstone.”

“I don’t *want* you to pay Cornerstone!”

“Then what do you want?!” His voice had finally soared above a normal volume. He threw his hands out to the sides and his cheeks were pink.

Hermione looked at him from the other side of his black marble desk, chest heaving, and for a moment, she wondered if this was why he hadn’t moved from his desk yet. Usually at this point in the argument, he had her pressed against a wall…

She took a deep breath, taking one step back from his desk. “I want to know,” she said, “what the point was.”

She watched as he took an even inhale, and said, “It was a way to spend three extra minutes with you.”

She met his eyes, heart thundering. The grey in them was warmer than usual. She took a slow breath.

“Anything else, Granger?” He blinked and his eyes were back to neutral. Not cold, but not warm.

Her cheeks were hot, and she looked down at his desk. “No. Yes, that’s all.” She kept her eyes down. "Yes, alright," she stammered and headed towards the door. She felt like there was something else she needed to yell at him for...

"See you tomorrow."

She stopped at the door. "Tomorrow's Saturday."

He lifted his eyes to hers. Neutral. "The Governors’ Ball."

She blinked at him. "I wasn’t… I’m not going."

He narrowed his eyes. "Did you not receive the memo?"

"I—" she started. "It was an offer, not a necessity!"

He tapped a knuckle on his desk. "As a Senior Consultant and one of the major forces behind Malfoy Consulting, you are expected to be there."

Oh yes, *that’s* what else she wanted to yell at him for. She placed her hands on her hips.

"Don’t you mean as the *Golden Girl*, I’m expected to be there?"

He looked at her. "Excuse me?"

She stepped toward him. "I was hired to be Senior Consultant over Non-Wizard Relations,

not the face of Malfoy Consulting Group."

"What are you going on about, Granger--?"

"I know about Wentworth," she snapped. She lowered her voice, moving away from the door. "You used me to get Wentworth to sign on – and countless others, I'm sure! Told him I would be working with M.C.G. before the idea had even entered my head. I know you used my name and my reputation to enhance your own, just like you used Katya and I'm sick of it," she hissed.

"I might have said I was offering you the position," Draco said, raising a brow, "but I don't remember telling Wentworth you had signed on."

"But you didn't –!" She stopped and whispered, "But you didn't offer me the position. You toasted a champagne glass at me." She crossed her arms.

"Same thing." Draco waved his hand, narrowing his eyes in confusion.

She huffed.

"Listen, Malfoy. I'm happy to defend you to those that don't believe in you, or write letters of recommendation. I'm happy to stand up for this company and what it represents. And I'm happy to help you make a mark in this world, but don't you dare assume anything about me without asking."

She sucked in a breath. There. It was done. She looked at Draco, and he was pressing his lips together.

He stood from his chair and stepped toward her, a slow pace around the desk.

"The only thing I *assumed* about you, Granger, was how ridiculously undervalued you were at the Ministry." His eyes were hot again, and she stepped to the right, hands grasping for one of his guest chairs as he advanced. "I *assumed* the Ministry would destroy you like it destroys all dreamers. And I *assumed* that you could do better."

Steady breath. Stepping to the side of the guest chair, putting it between the two of them.

"You came to me with the werewolf project, knowing I couldn't resist--"

"I came to you with a project to lure you to me, yes. To make you see what you could be capable of. What *we* could be capable of." He stepped closer, stopping at the chair. "But I don't give a fuck about the werewolves."

She should snarl at him, berate him for being a hypocrite and single-minded.

Instead, she shivered.

He saw it, and his eyes flashed at her, like they used to.

"You... You shouldn't have told people I'd be heading up this branch without knowing for sure."

"I *created* this branch for you," he whispered, and she watched his eyes flicker over her while she tried to catch her breath. "There would be no Non-Wizard Relations branch of Malfoy Consulting without you. It was tailor made for you and only you. To give you exactly what you wanted."

His knees were touching the chair, and she gripped the back of it, holding it between them like a shield. Her lips were dry. She wet them and regretted it as his eyes slipped downwards.

"Next time," she whispered, "ask me if I want it."

Her words slipped through the space between them like mist. She watched him breath them in, and she was suddenly unsure what it was they were even talking about. But she watched him nod once, and she felt the air shift, like they had an understanding.

He sucked in a deep breath, and she watched the heat in his eyes dissipate. "I would like for you to come with me to the Governors' Ball." He swallowed. And she kept from biting her cheek at the phrasing of his request. He continued, "There are several people attending who will not only be great connections for Malfoy Consulting, but also for you personally."

It was her turn to swallow. "I- I have nothing to wear."

A small smile lifted his lips, and he took a step away from the chair. "I'm sure we can get Pansy to whip something up."

He crossed back to his desk, away from her. She still gripped the back of the chair.

"She's in Italy. She's --" Hermione took a deep breath, now that he was away from her. "She's on a project."

He stopped, remembering. He cursed under his breath. "You honestly have nothing at home?"

"I mean, if it was socially acceptable to wear the same dress I wore to New Year's…"

This was not the thing to bring up, clearly. She watched him turn to her, eyes hot. He quickly looked her over before looking away.

He cleared his throat. "Where did you get that dress?"

"It was... a small shop in Diagon Alley. I don't remember the name."

"Desrosiers?" he asked, crossing to his fireplace.

"I think so, yes." She watched him toss Floo powder into the fire and call out for "Desrosiers."

A thin woman with long grey hair popped her head through the fire, and her wrinkles pulled tight as she smiled brightly at Draco. She greeted him like an old friend, and suddenly, Draco was speaking French to her.

She'd never heard a more delectable sound.

Hermione gripped the back of the chair again. His voice dipped and flowed over the foreign words, and Hermione tried to catch on, but couldn't. He gestured to her, and scooted to the side.

"Mz Granger!" The woman gasped. "Yes, mademoiselle, I 'ave your measurements." She continued speaking French to Draco. He responded and then they were laughing about something. Hermione frowned.

They wrapped up, and the woman kissed the air. She disappeared. He stood from the fireplace.

"They'll send your dress directly to you by tomorrow afternoon. It's close enough to your New Year's dress without being too close."

He crossed back to his desk, and grabbed up his quill to write a note.

"Send me the bill," she said.

He chuckled. "Sure."

She narrowed her eyes at him, not entirely convinced. She watched him write, bent over his desk, hair falling into his eyes. He said nothing else to her, so she took her cue to leave.

She headed for the door, barely reaching it before he spoke out.

"What is different about your partnership with Pansy? She is riding on your coattails just as much."

She turned to him. "It's completely different."

He dotted an "i" and looked up at her. "How?"

"She … I'm getting something in return. It's helping her image as well as my own."

"So, you're not getting enough from our relationship, Granger?"

She had no idea how he managed to suck the air out of a room with only a few words and his eyes.

"That's not..." She looked away from him.

"I'll give you the Snidgets."

Her eyes snapped to him. He put his hands in his pockets. He continued, "Let's move up the court date."

"I don't... You're not..." She stammered as he watched her.

"Or the Muggle-Born Integration Project? It's approved," he said.

She blinked at him. She opened her mouth. And closed it.

He continued, "Or whatever pet project you want. It's yours. Fully supported."

Her heart beat wildly in her chest. She didn't know how she got him started on a negotiation. He started walking towards her, slowly. She wished she still had that chair...

"But you'll need to realize that it's not Draco Malfoy they'll want to see at these galas and fundraisers and dinner parties. It's Hermione Granger, activist, war hero, Golden Girl. You'll need to use that celebrity to get what you want."

He stopped in front of her, close enough to touch. She breathed as evenly as she could, the echo of her first name on his lips.

She looked up at him through her lashes. "You may need to teach me how."

His jaw clicked. He took a deep breath, and she noticed his hands were still in his pockets, purposefully away from her. "We can start tomorrow night," he whispered.

She nodded.

He looked down, stepping back. "Your Bulgarian will be there tomorrow." He checked her reaction.

"Viktor?" She raised her brows. "At the Governors' Ball?"

"Mm-hm." Draco hummed. "You can talk to him about the Snidgets. Try to get his support."

She bit her lip, thinking. "Wonderful," she said, eyes dancing over the carpet.

"A few other people who I think you could get on your side for any of your causes," he said. "I can introduce you."

She looked up at him. "Okay."

His eyes ran over her face and he said, "See you at seven."

~*~

The dress arrived Saturday morning. A box she recognized from the last time Desrosier's delivered a dress to her. Hermione pulled off the top, and peeled back the tissue paper, anxious to find what kind of dress Draco had ordered for her.

Her breath left her in a puff as her fingers dragged over the silk.

It was gold.

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> The amount of love pouring out of all of you is just astounding. Thank you very much for being encouraging, for making me feel like I've interpreted characters in a way that need even more interpreting!
>
> Love to you all and I hope you have a quiet space to read...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She told Morty about the Ball that night, and asked if possibly he could cover the last hour of the evening so she could get home and get ready.

“Absolutely not.” He frowned at her. “You will leave at noon today, young lady.”

She blinked at him. “I’m sorry?”

“The Valentine’s Ball is a huge event! I don’t want you doddering around a bookshop when you should be getting ready!”

She gaped at him. “I… Well, I don’t need that much time. I’d hate to inconvenience you—“

“And don’t worry about tomorrow.” He waved the air, beginning up the stairs to his flat. “You’ll need to recuperate!”

“What? No, Morty. I’ll be in tomorrow!”

“Don’t even think of it!” he yelled back at her.

She pouted. “Fine! But I’ll be in by noon!”

The door slammed to his apartment.

She frowned.

When he forced her out of the store at twelve that day, Hermione went home and showered, preparing for Daphne and Tracey to come over.

She'd owled them as she left work the day before, asking if she could pay them to fix her up for the Ball.

It was odd, having the two of them over without Pansy. Pansy was always the one chatting and gossiping about old friends, so when Tracey played music from her wand, Hermione resolved to remain quiet for the afternoon.

"Do we want it up or down tonight?" Tracey asked, breaking the silence.

"Er…" Hermione stammered. The dress was similar to the New Year's Gala white dress. Ginny had made her wear her hair down that night, even though the witch styling her suggested up.

"What's your dress like?" Daphne asked, as she mixed some goo together to match her skin tone.

"It's gold. And floor length."

"Will you go put it on?" Tracey asked with wide eyes. Daphne looked like she more wanted to make sure she was matching her makeup tones, but Tracey looked quite giddy.

"Er… yes…"

Hermione went to her room and slid into the gold dress. She hadn't tried it on yet. The silk was cold against her skin, and it was cut very much like the white dress. She was planning on transfiguring the color of her New Year's shoes to gold so she could wear them with this dress too.

She came out of her room. Tracey gasped. Daphne appeared over her shoulder and sent her a very Slytherin smirk.

Hermione stepped into the living area where the light was better. "I'll need to wear a different bra, I know," she said as she turned. The dress was backless just like the white one, but the front was slightly different.

Just as Tracey was about to talk about her hair again, the fireplace roared to life and Ginny's head popped through. Her eyes went wide.

"What the fuck are you wearing!? What is that?!" Her mouth dropped open.

"I – Ginny!" Hermione jumped. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?? I go out of town for three days and now you're the Queen of England?"

“I’m going to a Valentine’s Ball tonight.”

Ginny gasped. “With Malfoy?”

Hermione’s eyes popped out of her head. Ginny couldn’t see Daphne and Tracey from her view of the living room. Hermione had also not gotten a chance to talk with Ginny about much of anything this week.

“With… Malfoy Consulting, yes,” Hermione tried. She looked to Daphne and Tracey quickly. Tracey was smirking, heating up a few hair instruments, and Daphne raised a brow at her.

“*Merlin’s beard,* Hermione.” Ginny looked her up and down again. “Do you need me to teach you the Contraceptive Charm before you go?”

Ginny wiggled her eyebrows at her. Hermione froze with her mouth open. She heard Tracey snort.

“I...I…” Hermione stammered. “Tracey and Daphne are here, doing my hair and makeup.”

Tracey came over to wave. Ginny lifted her brows. “Oh, hello.” Like it didn’t bother her one bit.

“Alright, did you need something, Ginny?” Hermione felt her face flushing, and knew Daphne would be able to see it as she started applying her makeup.

“I was just popping in to let you know that I’ll be home later tonight. Tomorrow’s match is rescheduled due to weather,” Ginny said. “But it looks like you won’t be home!”

“Oh, alright. I’ll see you when I get back then,” Hermione said, aching to take off the dress.

“Have fun! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Ginny winked at her, and disappeared.

Hermione closed her eyes. When she opened them, Tracey was looking over at her, hiding a smile.

“So. Up or down?”

“Er… Would up be best? Or is down alright?”

Hermione could hear a voice against her ear, whispering *Never do this* as he ripped her ponytail out. She looked up at Tracey, and it was like Tracey heard it too.

She smirked. “Let’s do a little bit of both.”

Hermione changed out of the gold dress, returned to the chair in the living room in her bathrobe, and let the girls continue. Daphne started applying her concealer, and Hermione tried to keep her face from flushing.

Daphne pulled back, looking down at her.

“Granger, are those love-bites?”

Hermione looked up at her, mortified as Daphne stared at her neck.

~*~

She popped through the fireplace at seven o'clock. The hall at the governor's mansion was just as large as Malfoy Manor, but instead of marble and snowflakes, she found warm tapestries and fluttering hearts.

She joined the receiving line, heading toward an entryway with swooping drapes, tied back with vines and finished with low lanterns.

Hermione realized she didn’t have an invitation. Or an escort. At the New Year’s Gala, she’d been sent an invitation and had even brought it with her, in case Narcissa needed to see it. Now she was just wandering toward a candlelit opening with a group of people, with nothing but the memory of a memo on her desk.

As she approached, she saw there was no list, and no one checking invitations, but she also had no idea who was standing at the entrance, shaking hands. He was a grey-bearded gentleman with kind eyes, and his considerably younger wife hung off his arm like a purse.

“Miss Granger!” the man said. He smiled brightly at her and Hermione decided to smile back.

He shook her hand and introduced her to his wife. The woman shook hands like Madame Michele liked, and Hermione reciprocated.

“I’m honored to be here tonight. Thank you for inviting Malfoy Consulting Group.”

“Of course, of course!” He patted his chest with pride. “We are so excited to see what young Mr. Malfoy and yourself achieve.”

She nodded politely, noting that he picked out only her and Draco from the whole of Malfoy Consulting.

He continued, “I believe Mr. Malfoy is already inside. Please enjoy yourself tonight, Miss Granger.”

She smiled and stepped under the canopy of drapes, following the silks toward an entrance. She found herself on the second story of a large ballroom, counting twelve chandeliers lighting the room. Before her, the staircase split, rounding down the two sides to pour into the ballroom.

She was just wondering to herself if the purpose of the two staircases was aesthetic, or if there was a proper staircase to enter from, when Draco appeared at the bottom of the staircase to her right.

And it was decided.

She placed her hand on the railing, letting her other gather the silk material at her hip to keep from tripping, and stepped off the landing. She kept her eyes on him. He wore a white suit and a smirk.

He let his eyes wander down her form once before returning his gaze to her face. She felt a blush running up her neck before a flash went off to her left, and she turned her head to see Skeeter and her photographer set up in the middle of the two staircases.

“Miss Granger! You look stunning!” Skeeter screeched. “Tell me, do you have your eye on someone special this Valentine’s Day?”

She stopped on the staircase, and blinked at her. She opened her mouth, make a squeaking sound, and closed it.

She turned back to Draco, still watching her, four stairs away.

How *mortifying*. Was this a date, or wasn’t it?

And it was *her* decision in that moment?

Draco looked down. She watched him shift backwards, like he was about to step away from the stairs. From her. Step out of the way, and remove himself from the moment.

Hermione turned to Skeeter. “I will refuse to answer that incredibly invasive question, Rita, but if you’d like to photograph me walking away with Draco Malfoy, feel free.”

Rita’s eyes grew wide and greedy. She saw Bozo lifting the lens quickly, and Hermione turned to find Draco’s eyes flashing at her.

She continued descending the last four steps, lifting her hand from the railing and slipping it into Draco’s outstretched hand.

His fingers were warm as they slid across her palm, and the camera flashed. He tucked her arm around his, and turned them as she stepped off the last stair, heading away from Skeeter, and it was at that moment that Hermione realized that Draco’s white suit was embroidered with gold thread.

She grinned down at her shoes, and Draco steered her to a tray of champagne glasses with strawberries at the bottom. He handed her a glass, and just as he turned to say something to her, a familiar voice caught her ear.

“Miss Hermione Granger!”

She turned and found Professor Slughorn sloshing toward them, his glass of brandy slopping around the edges and his cheeks ruddy.

“Professor!”

She barely had time to take him in before he was pressing a light kiss to her cheek. Oh, my.

“Miss Granger! You are a *vision*, my dear!” He turned his eyes on Draco. “And my favorite Slytherin – don’t tell Mr. Zabini,” he whispered.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Draco smirked, and shook his hand.

“I knew it, I said,” Slughorn hiccupped. “I knew that I had chosen an excellent bunch for the Slug Club that year! Wildly successful consulting firm containing not one, but *three* of my students!”

Hermione pressed her lips together, keeping herself from mentioning that Draco had other things on his mind that year…

“Oh!” Slughorn burst. “I want to introduce you to someone, Miss Granger.” He started turning away from them, gesturing for them to follow. “She was before your time at Hogwarts, but she would be an excellent contact for you.”

They followed, Draco slipping her arm from his elbow, and placing his hand on her lower back.

That was so much worse. The silk was cool against her skin but heated immediately upon contact with him.

She mingled and spoke with Slughorn’s friend. Thirty minutes into the evening, Hermione was surprised at how Slughorn had tossed them about the room, introducing them to four people who would all make excellent resources or clients for Malfoy Consulting. Hermione sipped her champagne and found a new respect for Horace Slughorn.

Throughout all the introductions, Draco kept his hand on her back. She couldn’t tell which was worse – toward the beginning when he had his palm so low on the curve that she could feel electricity running in all directions every time she moved, or when he’d brought his hand slightly higher when they were speaking to the vampire novelist, letting his thumb brush across the bare skin in a way that could be purely accidental, but made every hair on her body stand up and shake.

“Ah! Mr. Buckworth!” Slughorn’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts. “Mr. Buckworth, come meet my friends here.”

A broad man about her grandfather’s age approached, extending his hand to Slughorn. She felt Draco shift next to her, and she glanced at him quickly to see that he was focused solely on Mr. Buckworth.

“Mr. Buckworth, you know my friend Draco Malfoy, yes?” Slughorn gestured to Draco with his brandy glass. Hermione thought she maybe felt a drop land on her foot.

Buckworth looked to Draco. “Lucius’s boy. My, my. You’ve been making quite a splash!” Buckworth smiled and shook Draco’s hand.

At Lucius’s mention, Hermione checked in with Draco, waiting for his eye to twitch or for his feathers to ruffle at being called “Lucius’s boy.” Draco grinned. And shook his hand

enthusiastically.

“Thank you Buckworth. My father talks about you very fondly. And you, of course, know Hermione Granger?”

She felt a slight push on her back, and she was stepping forward to shake hands with a friend of Lucius Malfoy. For the second day in a row, the sound of her first name from Draco’s lips paused her brain processes.

“I don’t know if I’ve had the pleasure!” Mr. Buckworth’s smile was kind, and she appreciated that his eyes didn’t rake down her body like so many of the people she’d been introduced to this evening. “Rhett Buckworth, Miss Granger.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Buckworth. Do you know Horace from Hogwarts?”

“Er, yes and no.” Mr. Buckworth chuckled and Slughorn giggled into his brandy. “Despite being a terrible student at Hogwarts, I worked with Horace after my time there, working with potions and the like.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Hermione said.

“Tell me, Mr. Buckworth, do you still keep in touch with Geoffrey Townsend?”

Hermione looked to Draco. He had a glint in his eye that she recognized, but it was so faint that she was sure no one else would see it.

“Geoffrey?” Mr. Buckworth leaned his torso in, like he hadn’t heard correctly. “My! I haven’t seen Geoffrey in years! Mighty fine potioneer, wasn’t he, Horace?”

Slughorn mumbled something into his glass.

“Granger just had a meeting with him last week,” Draco said. Hermione blinked at him. Was he not there at dinner as well? Draco looked down at her and gave her the smallest nod that she couldn’t dream of interpreting correctly.

“Is that right?” Mr. Buckworth said. “He always loved beating me at Quidditch in school. How is the old fellow?”

Hermione turned to Mr. Buckworth. “He’s wonderful. I had a lovely meeting with him.” She felt Draco’s hand on her back, pressing slightly. She gave it a whirl. “We were discussing my current project, the Werewolf Policy. We’re taking it to the Wizengamot next month, trying to get equal rights for employment and education for werewolves. Mr. Townsend was so generous – he pledged a considerable amount to our fundraising goal.”

“Oh?” Mr. Buckworth said. And Hermione watched the man’s lips twist and his eyes narrow. Had she said something wrong? He continued, “So Geoffrey is still throwing his money around, is he?”

Draco chuckled next to her. Hermione felt like she was missing something. Was she not supposed to bring up the fundraising?

“How much did he pledge?” Mr. Buckworth asked, eyes squinting.

Hermione blinked at him.

“I think just about half of the goal,” Draco supplied, looking down at her like he needed confirmation of his facts. The glint was still in his eyes, and she recognized it. She’d seen it before on him. It meant he was winning.

“Of course, he did,” Mr. Buckworth muttered. He looked at a spot over Hermione’s shoulder, then brought his eyes back to her. “At your next meeting, you tell him that his old pal Rhett matched his donation.” He looked to Draco. “*And* he sent a lovely fruit basket on Monday morning.”

What… what just happened.

Draco chuckled, saying something about Mr. Buckworth’s generosity and shook his hand. They made some kind of joke about how Draco’s favorite fruit was those chocolate-dipped strawberries, and Hermione felt Draco’s thumb brush across her skin again. Like praise.

Slughorn pulled Mr. Buckworth’s attention with an old story about flobberworms, and Hermione turned to Draco’s shoulder.

“I have no idea what just happened,” she whispered.

“You just secured your fundraising for your first project, Granger.” His voice washed over the top of her head and down her neck.

“I… I didn’t do anything, though.”

“You were perfect.”

He was teaching her, like he’d promised.

She was elated that they had just secured the funding for the Werewolf Project. She was confused at how they had done it, but she felt slightly giddy.

As Slughorn grabbed the attention of a passing gentleman, Draco leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“I need to speak with Horace about something, but this gentleman here is the youngest Hogwarts governor. He’s also Muggle-born.”

She looked up into his grey eyes, and nodded. This was her opportunity to discuss the Muggle-born Integration Program with someone who could actually support it.

Draco shook the governor’s hand, and stepped to the side with Slughorn – hand sliding across her back as he moved away, thumb grazing the skin – as Hermione introduced herself. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Draco asked Slughorn a question, and the older man’s eyes opened wide and he nodded erratically. Slughorn escorted Draco away, and Hermione refocused on her discussion with the Hogwarts governor.

Twenty minutes later, as she was saying goodbye to the governor, promising to be in touch, Draco had still not returned. She set her empty champagne glass down on a passing tray and turned to see that the dancing had started in the middle of the ballroom. She edged her way toward a pillar, and searched the room for someone familiar to talk to.

"*Merlin*, what a sight!"

She turned to see Blaise approaching her, running his eyes over her dress, her hair.

"Eyes up here, Blaise." She pointed at her face.

"An impossible request."

She looked him over. He was wearing a pink suit. She blinked at him, amazed at his nerve.

"Someone's in the Valentine's Day spirit," she said.

He leaned with her against the pillar and said, "Well, I assumed most single women would be in red for the Ball. I wanted to make sure I matched for the pictures."

She grinned. "And how are the prospects? Anyone caught your eye?"

"Besides present company, you mean?" He winked at her. "There's not enough singles here," he whined, looking out over the dancers. "A few here and there, but I don't even have my proper wingman. Even *Draco's* here with someone."

She felt her blood run cold and the smile drop off her face. She looked at him, searching wildly.

"What?"

Blaise kept his eyes on the crowd. "Some gorgeous model in a gold dress."

Hermione frowned, trying to suck in air. That's why he was in gold accents. To match a different girl in a gold dress. Why would he…? Was he with her now?

She turned to scan the dance floor, looking for gold.

"Granger." Blaise's voice pulled her to look back at him. She pressed her lips together, trying to keep them from trembling. Blaise raised a brow, and smirked at her.

"I meant you."

She blinked at him, as his full lips split into a huge grin. His eyes crinkled. And he snorted.

"Oh…" She felt her cheeks warm. "Oh, no. Er, Draco and I aren't…"

Blaise laughed. "Oh, you're in so much trouble, Granger…"

"No, I mean… What I meant to say was –"

Blaise bent over, hands on his knees. His laugh was booming around them.

“That’s not… um…” Hermione stammered.

Blaise stood, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Merlin, I’m glad I clarified. The first girl in a gold dress you ran into would have been Avada’d on the spot!”

Hermione felt how hot her face was and she shook her head at him. “I didn’t mean ….”

“Best of luck tonight, Granger.” Blaise clasped her shoulder. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” He winked at her, and left her sputtering.

~*~

Hermione found Draco a bit later, across the room speaking to a wizened and grey man. They were turned in to each other, having what looked like a very serious conversation. Before she had an opportunity to wander that way, she ran into several people that she had met at the New Year’s Gala. She spent some time catching up with them.

She was just turning to excuse herself from a particularly boring conversation, when her eyes landed on Viktor Krum, standing three paces from her, waiting to speak with her.

His eyes lit up when she saw him. He smiled and she couldn’t help but to smile back.

“Herminny,” he said, and she threw her head back and laughed at how things never change.

He reached for her hand, and brought it to his lips. He hadn’t aged a day it seemed. His hair was still short, his neck and shoulders still broad, and his eyes were still kind. He wore deep red robes, and when he pulled his lips away from her hand, she could see that his eyes were deep brown, like she remembered.

“Viktor, how are you?” She smiled.

“I am vell.” His eyes danced over her face. “You are still beautiful.”

She blushed. “You are still playing for Bulgaria, yes? I know a bit more about Quidditch these days because I know so many more Quidditch players!”

“Yes. I play your Ronald Veasley in two veeks.” He looked back and forth between her eyes at Ron’s mention, then continued. “You are vorking vith Draco Malfoy?”

“Yes,” she said. “I am heading up a branch for Non-Wizard Relations.”

“And vat does that mean?” He grinned.

“I get to help Magical Creatures and Muggle-borns.” She took the plunge. “There’s a project I’m working on now that might be of interest to you…” She looked up at him through her lashes and saw he was still with her. “Do you know of the Golden Snidgets?”

Ten minutes of light conversation and Hermione had Viktor eating out of the palm of her hand. He nodded at everything she said, and agreed with every injustice against the little birds. She told him she was thinking of contacting him, to see about some publicity, and he was thrilled at the thought of hearing from her again.

She was about to mention another boring fact about the Golden Snidget population when the string quartet behind her started a new movement. Hermione turned to look, recognizing the tune, and when she looked back, Viktor held out his hand.

“Dance vith me again, Hermyown?”

She nodded, and placed her hand in his. He led her onto the dance floor, joining other couples. They faced each other, and Hermione was so glad she had just gone over this dance with Miss Truesdale.

The French Waltz began to play.

Viktor bowed, keeping his eyes on her.

She smiled at him, and curtseyed back once it was the lady’s turn. She thought Miss Truesdale would be quite proud of how deep her curtsey was.

She stepped into Viktor’s arms, one hand on his shoulder, the other in his hand, and they waltzed. He pressed her to him as he lifted her, the silk heating against her skin, and she giggled when he set her down.

This was easy. It was so easy to dance with Viktor Krum, like no time had passed. Like there wasn’t a war and Cedric Diggory was still alive, and Sirius and Remus and Snape and Fred and Dumbledore. They turned around each other, and then she followed what she remembered, turning right to meet the gentleman two couples away.

And her heart stopped when it was Draco Malfoy. Again. Smirking.

The same dance. The same song. The same partners.

His eyes flashed at her before he bowed, just like he had five years ago. When he straightened, she smiled, chuckling under her breath. She curtseyed as well as she could.

“What are you laughing at, Granger?”

She rose and met his eyes, smiling. “Coincidences.”

He held up his right hand. She brought hers to his, but did not touch him, just like she hadn’t five years ago. Only now for so many more reasons.

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” he said. They began the turn around each other.

“Oh, really?” She smirked back at him, thinking if he only knew…

“I’m exactly where I planned to be. Just as I had planned to be here the last time we danced to this song.”

She stopped, back where she started. Her pulse buzzing. He couldn’t mean…

She watched as he smirked at her, eyes flashing, then turned back to his original partner.

“Herminy?”

She turned, eyes glassy, and saw Viktor reaching for her. She took his hand just as the next movement started.

She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t—

She stepped on Viktor’s toes and he grunted. She let him lead her, twirling, and she let her eyes search for Draco. Trying to spot him amongst the dancers.

Viktor bowed. Was the dance done? It just began. She bent her knees in a most inappropriate curtsey, and told him she needed a drink and would be right back.

She turned, ignoring the Bulgarian voice asking if she would like him to retrieve it for her, eyes running over the crowd.

She couldn’t breathe. She put her hand to her stomach, feeling the gold silk, and turned down a quiet hallway.

For years, she’d dreamed about how fate had brought them together for only a moment at the Yule Ball. She’d thought of the way he’d looked at her that night, wondering what it was he was thinking.

She heard her heels click. And then the snap of dragon leather.

She wasn’t ready. She… What did he mean?

She heard the dragon leather faster.

“Granger.”

She stopped. She was at the end of the hallway, and he was just behind her.

“I didn’t mean to… scare you or…”

She heard the frustrated sound of him pushing his hair back. She wanted to look at him but didn’t trust herself.

“When did this start for you? Please, tell me,” she whispered.

Silence. And she was terrified. Maybe that’s not what he had meant.

“Fourth year.”

There was panic in her chest, and joy swirled around it. She turned around, and his face was as terrified as she felt.

“I win.” She smirked at him.

He blinked at her, confused.

She closed the gap between them, and his eyes darkened.

“Oh, you stupid bint.” He reached for her, and she almost laughed as he kissed her.

She wound her hands up his lapels, behind his neck, and into his hair, pressing her chest into his. His lips moved over hers and his hands slipped across the silk, down and around to grab her.

He walked them towards a door, pressing her against it as he opened it. She tumbled into a small sitting room. She gained her balance as the door closed, and then her back was pressed against it.

He was panting against her face and she heard herself gasping for air. His grey eyes were dancing over her, and she felt his hand tracing her ribs through the silk. She felt his forehead against hers.

She could see a fireplace, chairs and couches.

“Did you know this sitting room was here?” She looked at him suspiciously.

“Granger, *you* led me down this hall, not the other way around.” He leaned in, hovering his mouth close to hers. “But, yes, I’ve been here before. My mother and I had tea on those chairs just last month.”

“I miss your mother.”

“Let’s talk about her later, shall we?”

She smiled and pressed her lips against his. She still had her hands tangled in his hair, and she took the opportunity to pull her fingers through it. He groaned, and his hands squeezed her backside, and bringing her closer to his hips.

“Tell me what you want.” His breath misted over her lips, his hands running along her torso, sliding closer to her chest. One hand grazed her breast and she gasped.

“Everything.”

He dropped his head onto her shoulder and groaned.

Then she was being lifted. She gasped, his arm wrapped around her waist and took her off the door, turning them. She grabbed his shoulder, and he walked them into the room. She had a moment to take in the fireplace, the arm chairs, before she was falling, landing on a plush chaise lounge. The back of the lounge rose on her right side, the fireplace on her left.

She found her breath again just before Draco sat up and started removing his jacket.

Oh, god, please.

She was panting by the time he lowered down on her. The chandelier above them twinkled, and lit his hair perfectly, just like she'd always dreamed.

"Tell me when to stop."

She almost laughed at that, but then he was kissing her again. He knelt above her, both knees to the one side of her, and one hand braced on the lounge, while the other moved from her hip up to her chest again. She gasped against his lips when he squeezed her breast, running his thumb across her.

"Oh, god, Draco."

He bit her lip, a stinging pain. He quickly pulled away. She pressed her tongue against the sting. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, attaching to her neck again as he continued to play with her through the silk.

She brought her hands up to his sides, feeling his muscles shiver. She wanted him on top of her, pressing against her. Why was he so far away?

"More. Please, Draco."

He shivered and huffed against her neck. She moved her legs, bringing her left knee up, feeling the silk slide down her thigh toward her waist. Her knee pressed against his hip and he started to move. He lowered down on her, pressing his chest against her and she sighed.

"Better?"

"Yes, god."

She could feel his hips against hers, could feel him, hard against her.

He kissed her, and she shifted under him and he gasped. She loved it. She did it again and he pulled his mouth from hers.

He slipped a hand between their ribs to touch her breast again. She moaned and then he rolled his hips and she yelped, clutching his shoulders.

"Tell me when to stop," he whispered against her mouth and rolled his hips again.

The third time she met his hips with hers and cursed. He slipped. He shivered and groaned. She brought her hips up again but he was still.

"I can't… I need to…"

He was pulling away and she was terrified. He lifted his hips away. Then he leaned over her again, and she could feel his hand on her left hip, slipping under the silk.

She sighed, and he kissed her neck again. She stared at the chandelier and his fingers followed the line of her knickers, coming closer.

He touched her over the fabric, and she turned her head to bite his ear. She felt his breath on her neck, as he touched her again.

“God, please, please, please,” she panted.

“Tell me – Tell me when to stop.”

“Why are you—“ she moaned as he touched her again. “Why would you stop? What’s wrong?”

He looked down at her, cheeks pink and his brow was moist. “If you want me to stop… If you want to stop—“ He was panting, his eyes flashing at her.

“Why the fuck would we stop!”

She caught her breath as his eyes moved across her face.

“Because… because I’m a virgin?” She licked her lips. “Is that why?”

“That’s why you stopped us. Last time.”

“*I* stopped us?? *You* stopped us!” She started to sit up, and he leaned back on his heels.

“*You* said you had never – So I pulled away!”

“Yes, I *remember*.” She snarled at him. “But I never asked you to stop!”

His brows came together and his mouth opened. He looked so young. Then his grey eyes turned dark.

“If you don’t tell me to stop, then I’m going to take you, Granger. Right here on this chaise lounge.”

She shivered and gasped.

“What are you waiting for.”

She felt her cheeks blush at her brazenness, just before he shoved at her shoulders, her back landing on the cushions. He leaned over her, eyes taking her in. Then he brought his hands to the front of her dress and ripped it down the middle. She gasped.

“What are you --?”

“I’ll buy you a thousand dresses,” he said as his lips caught hers. And her pulse jumped at the promise.

She had just started to wonder how she would be *leaving* the governor’s mansion, when Draco slid his lips down her cheek, sucking a path over her collarbone, and trailing toward

her left breast. Her bra was useless as Draco pressed an open-mouth kiss against her over the fabric. She clutched at his hair, pressing him closer, and brought her leg up to move against his hip.

His fingers started gathering the material across her legs, pushing it up to her waist and he reclaimed the path he'd found earlier, circling closer to her core. One of his fingers dipped underneath and found her precious sweet spot immediately. She bucked her hips and cried and Draco ran his teeth along her the top of her breast.

He started a torturous rhythm against her core, swirling and rubbing and Hermione closed her eyes and felt *everything*.

She was rising, and she didn't notice that his mouth had left her chest until she heard him speak.

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes and found him watching her. She barely had enough time to be embarrassed at what she assumed her face had been doing before he swirled her again and twisted his hand, pressing one finger inside of her.

She gripped the arm of the chaise lounge behind her head and fell apart.

She slid her gaze to the chandelier above her, watching the many crystals spiral out from the center and continue to dance into space.

She gasped and shook and squeezed her thighs together, holding him inside of her.

When she floated down, Draco was still watching her. Cheeks pink and sweat dampening his hair. His mouth was slack open and he panted. She could see his tongue running over his bottom teeth.

He withdrew his hand from her and she bit her lip to keep from moaning.

She sat up. And he pulled back to let her. She slipped her dress off her shoulders and tugged until she could pull her bra off and toss it to the side. As her arms came back, she saw him lick his lips, and place his left hand on the backrest of the lounge for support. She reached up and began unbuttoning his dress shirt. Such fine material.

He sat still, watching her undress him, and she felt his eyes eating her alive. Topless, and undressing him.

She was halfway done before she saw it. A faint jagged line starting at his collarbone and zagging down his chest. She pulled the right side of his shirt back and found where the line cracked under his heart and ricocheted down his stomach.

Sectumsempra.

He snatched her hands off of him, grabbing her wrists. She looked up at him and his jaw was tight, looking away from her. He took a calming breath and turned her right hand, kissing the

inside of her wrist.

She let him kiss her arm two more times before she threw herself at him.

She smacked her teeth against his and he grunted. She pulled back, bringing her hand to her stinging lips. He laughed. And the sound bounced around the room, warming her.

She tried reaching up again, but the remains of the dress were slipping under her. She huffed and tossed her legs off the chaise, standing and shoving the dress down to the ground. She reached back and pulled off each of her heels, and it wasn't until she turned to come back to him that she realized she was in front of him in just her knickers. And he was fully dressed still.

Not that it bothered him one bit. She watched his eyes run down her body, and her arms twitched to come up across her chest. She kept them down.

"Take off your trousers."

She could hardly believe the words had tumbled from her lips. Neither could he, apparently. His eyes widened and darkened all in one breath. He looked at her and breathed deeply.

"I mean…" she said, sounding a bit more like herself. "That *is* where we're going with this, yes?"

She stood before him on the couch. He was still on his knees, where he had been before she stood and took off her dress. He smiled darkly at her, and in one fluid movement he stood, right in front of her in the very little space between her and the couch.

She sucked in a breath, and her breasts touched his shirt. She wanted to step backwards, give him some space, but she held her ground. She looked up at him, craning her neck at the small distance.

His lips were parted, and she heard him breathing as her breasts brushed against him with every one of her inhales.

He moved his hands to the buckle of his belt, knuckles sweeping across her belly. She gasped. His lips quirked.

She heard the harsh sounds of the metal, and the buttons of his dress pants slipping through the holes. She kept her eyes on his, finding herself breathing faster just to feel the caress on her breasts.

One of his knuckles continued to brush her stomach as he unbuttoned, lower and lower, feather light. She licked her lips. He swallowed.

Out of the bottom of her sightline, she saw his hands come to his waist, and slowly he pushed his pants past his hips. She heard them thud to the ground, and she pushed on his stomach, falling with him as he tumbled backwards to sit on the couch. She placed her legs on either side of him and attached to his mouth as her fingers grabbed for the rest of the buttons of his shirt.

He groaned against her, and she could feel the fabric of his trunks against her thighs. His hands came up to her hips, squeezing and running his fingers across her softly.

She finished with the last of his shirt buttons and pulled the shirt open. She placed her hands on his stomach, and he gasped. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and he tilted his head back. She shoved the shirt down his arms.

She moved her knees outward, trying to get closer to him, and then brought her hips down to his.

They gasped together, sucking the air between them. She could feel him hard against her center, and she knew she was wet and warm. She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together, and rolled her hips against him, feeling him press right against her. Sharp pleasure ran up her spine and he grabbed her hips, letting out a tight sound.

She ran her hands up into his hair, and moved again. His hips chased her but then his fingers were pressing bruises into her hip bones, and he was holding her still.

“Draco, please.”

He reached up, holding her to him, and turned them until she was on her back again, with him pressing against her on the chaise.

He breathed against her face and she looked at him while he pressed his eyes closed.

They snapped open, and he looked at her. “Are you sure.”

“Yes,” she rasped. “Yes, yes, yes.”

The hand still on her hip started tugging at her knickers, sliding them down, and she lifted her hips to help him.

She was wheezing in a particularly unattractive way, but he didn’t seem to care. She reached down to help him with his underwear, but he was touching her again. She threw her head back and stared at her favorite chandelier in the history of chandeliers.

He pushed a finger inside of her and she hummed. Then he worked a second in, and she closed her eyes, pressing her lips together. She could feel his breath on her neck and he started moving his hand.

His fingers were thicker than her own, and the pressure was good. Too good.

“Draco, please. Please, please.” She opened her eyes and found him watching her. “No more of this, please.”

“Shh.” He breathed across her face, hushing her as she whimpered. “Trust me.”

He moved inside of her for a few strokes, opening and twisting, then pressed against her sweet spot and her mouth opened in a moan.

“I’m ready, I’m ready.” She gasped. And she released the cushions where she was gripping them and grabbed at his hair, bringing his face to hers. She began kissing him, begging him, and he pulled his hand away, ridding himself of his underwear.

She felt him at her entrance, and she opened her eyes to look at him. He pressed his forehead to hers, and she nodded.

He pushed inside of her, and it was tight. She bit her tongue to keep from saying so. She squeezed her eyes shut, a pinching and pressure, and why did people do this?

She grit her teeth together, and felt him release a breath across her face. She opened her eyes, and Draco’s eyes were pressed shut, jaw tight. If it was hurting him too, maybe they should stop? And then she saw his jaw release, and recognized the raw pleasure on his features. And she was the one giving it to him.

He opened his eyes to look down at her, and they were hot, and she shivered. “Okay?” he asked.

She nodded.

He pulled back and entered her again, slowly. The pinching pressure was still there, but now she got to watch his face, as he pressed his eyes closed. The third time, he bent his head forward and kissed her, letting his tongue wander into her mouth and push and pull at the same time as his hips.

That was better. Her hands were on his shoulders and she let her nails dig in.

He let one hand come up and palm her breast.

That was better too. She got to feel some of that electricity again, and it calmed her.

He let that hand trail down her stomach, rounding her hips and pulled her knee up slightly, and it was like he slid in deeper. She wasn’t that big of a fan but she got to watch his face and hear him grunt.

That was more better.

She watched him, his eyes pressed closed and his breath pushing out, and the sweat darkening his hair. Every few thrusts he would drag his lip into his mouth and release it on the next thrust. She liked that.

She was just getting used to the rhythm, starting to count the thrusts when his eyes drifted open. She watched her breath move his hair.

“Can I go faster?”

His voice was low, and raspy, and everything she wanted. She nodded. He snapped his hips, and watched her reaction. She pressed her lips together, and nodded that he could continue.

He brought his forehead down to hers again, and lowered his upper body down on her. He grabbed the leg that was around his hip, and held it there as his hips moved.

That was… better.

At least she could feel his chest against hers, her breasts rubbing him.

Then the hand that held her leg to him slipped around, and in the little space he had, he touched her again.

That was best. Yes, that was the best.

She groaned as she pushed against it. She almost wanted it to stop, so she squeezed quickly, and Draco's rhythm stuttered. He found it again, just in time for her to try squeezing again. He groaned and got even faster. And his fingers played with her even faster.

She felt sweat between their bodies, and she was starting to gasp. This was best. This was sex and it was best.

The hand that propped him up, holding him above her, starting winding into her hair. She felt a slight tug, and his lips her on her neck, his hand between their bodies, and his fingers in her hair.

"Fuck…" he whispered.

And she moaned. And he slipped, and worked her harder. She was at the top, and she stared at her chandelier, and she bit her lip, and he pressed a light kiss to her cheek.

And she groaned, letting her mind close and her body open.

She grabbed at his back, and he snapped his hips and she cried, and squeezed him. He slowed as she fell apart, and once she was coming down, she opened her eyes and he was watching her.

She swallowed, and smiled. And he snapped his hips against her four more times before he groaned and tremored.

She watched his face, his jaw open and his eyes squeezing shut. He dropped his head onto her chest, and breathed out, the air hot against her skin. One hand was still gripping her hair, and the other tight on her hip. His body was heavy against her, and she slowly ran her hands from his shoulders, across his back and up into his wet hair, repeating the motion over and over like waves.

She wondered if maybe they slept like this. Then she felt his lips brush against the top of her breast, his tongue flicking out to taste the sweat on her chest. Then he shifted and slid out of her.

That was an odd feeling.

His arms shook as he pushed himself up, kneeling over her. She remembered just how naked she was as he took one last look at her before standing, and offered his hands so she could sit up.

They got dressed. Well, he got dressed, and then he transfigured a robe for her out of her torn dress. He found a pot of Floo powder on the mantle, and after she'd given up the search for her underwear, she joined him at the fireplace, holding her shoes.

"If you're planning to go back out there," she said. "You'll need a look in the mirror first."

His hair was a mess, his face was flushed, and her lipstick was all over him.

He nodded at her. "I'll make excuses for you."

Hermione nodded, imagining all sorts of things.

Granger had to leave. She's gotten well and truly shagged and now she needs a rest.

Please excuse Granger, she's looking for her underwear.

She looked up and he was watching her. He stepped into her, and kissed her lightly on her lips. She swallowed, and he tossed the powder into the fireplace. She stepped through, and muttered her location.

She watched his eyes swirl away from her as the flames licked at her.

She stepped out into her living room. It was late.

She dropped her shoes, turned, and went to Ginny's room. She was asleep.

Hermione sat on Ginny's bed and shook her shoulder.

Ginny's eyes opened slowly. "Hey. Did you have fun."

Hermione stared at her.

"I need you to teach me the Contraceptive Charm."

Ginny was suddenly wide awake.

Chapter End Notes

So much love to the incredible @nikitajobson on tumblr for the gorgeous art featured in this chapter.

Jobson
'19

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Hello lovelies. I'm late. I know. I will probably be late next week too because I'm moving. So things will be a little off schedule for the next few weeks, but I will still be writing. No worries.
>
> THANK YOU so much for all the support and love you've given me from the last chapter (from all the chapters, actually). What an insane response to the last chapter. I'm so glad you all enjoyed it, and I hope you enjoy this one as well.

Hermione's heart stopped when Ginny told her that the Contraceptive Charm needed to be cast *before*.

Then she started crying when Ginny said she had a potion that one could take for the day after.

Ginny jumped up and retrieved the potion. As Hermione hiccupped and swallowed, Ginny watched her.

"So… that was my last one," Ginny said. "So, we'll need to brew or buy some more…" Ginny's voice lilted up at the end.

"Of course. I'll pay for a new batch for you." Hermione wiped her eyes.

"Right." Ginny said, watching her. "Should we be buying double?"

Hermione looked at her.

"Or was this the only time you'll be needing a potion for a little while?"

Ginny was digging, and Hermione was too exhausted to figure it out.

“I mean,” Ginny said. “For next time…”

Hermione blinked. “I think I’ll remember the Charm next time.”

Ginny pounced on her, grabbing her shoulders and shaking. “SO THERE WILL BE A NEXT TIME???!”

As her body was shaken around and her torso mounted and hugged like a doll, Hermione finally realized what Ginny was asking.

Ginny pulled back. “What are you wearing? Where’s your dress?”

“He ripped it off of me.”

Ginny fell off the bed.

~*~

Would there be a next time?

Hermione covered her love bites, both fresh and old, and looked at her reflection.

They hadn’t discussed it. How would this work? Or was it not going to? Was last night all there would be?

And before the Love Contract could even cross her mind, a peck at the window revealed the owl with today’s *Prophet*.

Wonderful.

She grabbed it from the owl’s leg, and brought it into the dining room. She opened the fold.

And there she was on the front page, descending a grand staircase and sliding her hand into Draco’s.

She sat and tossed the paper across the room, placing her head in her hands.

Thirty seconds later she picked it up again, smoothed it out, and read Rita’s loving tribute to the Valentine’s Day Ball. Thankfully, Rita had described the two of them as members of Malfoy Consulting Group, and not War Hero Hermione Granger or Ex-Death Eater Draco Malfoy. At least there might be some good publicity for M.C.G.

She sat and sipped her coffee and wondered what to do with her morning. Ginny was gone already, and Hermione didn’t have to get ready for Cornerstone until closer to noon, per Morty’s insistence.

She’d taken a shower the night before at Ginny’s urging. Ginny had started telling her all sorts of… interesting things, like they were now bound by a common knowledge of the

mystery of life. Things that Hermione had heard over the years, and had filed away as “adult things,” but she was now an adult, she guessed.

“Do you feel different?” Ginny had asked, just as Hermione was shutting the door to the bathroom.

“I feel… sore.”

Ginny nodded enthusiastically, going on to explain how she and Harry had to wait a few days before they could try again, and when Hermione’s eye twitched involuntarily, Ginny laughed and let her shut the door in her face.

Did she feel different?

Her brain tried to articulate it while the shower washed away the scent of him.

~*~

She finally dragged herself to Cornerstone at half past eleven. It was oddly busy when she arrived, and although Morty gave her a disappointed glare that she’d come in at all, he was silently grateful that she could immediately jump on and assist an older gentleman with a few top shelf books.

The store remained busy throughout the day, which didn’t give her much time to let her mind wander to the way Draco threaded his fingers through her hair when he was close, or how he gripped at her hips when he changed the angle, or the low sound of his voice when he whispered, “Look at me.”

Not much time. But she found some anyway.

When Morty came back downstairs just before closing, he joined her at the counter as she finished her notations in the ledger.

“Your life is becoming far too interesting to still be working here, Miss Granger.”

Hermione smiled and closed the book.

“Did Mr. Malfoy get in touch with you?”

She missed the ink pot entirely as she tried to place the quill back.

“I’m sorry?”

Morty cleaned his glasses, and looked up at her. “He was here. About fifteen minutes after opening.”

Hermione’s heart beat stuttered. “What… What did he want?”

Morty slid his glasses back on his nose. “Well, it certainly wasn’t a book.”

Hermione’s eyes widened as Morty’s brow lifted.

“I… What…”

“I let him know that you were off today, as I assumed you would take the whole day like I told you to.”

“Oh,” Hermione said. “Well, I guess I’ll see him at work tomorrow.”

She turned from the thin shopkeeper, and tried to process this.

Why had he come? What did he want?

A chill hit her.

Did he want to clarify things? Make sure she knew it wouldn’t happen again? Or how they weren’t to discuss it again?

She thought of how he’d gone to New York after they’d first kissed. How he’d returned cold, and closed off.

Hermione quickly closed shop, and headed home.

The next morning, after barely catching enough sleep to suffice for the day, Hermione was woken by the gentle weight of Ginny laying down next to her in her bed.

“Ginny?” She rubbed her eyes. “It’s four in the morning.”

“Yeah, it’s your turn, Granger.”

Hermione turned on her side and waited for Ginny to talk. Ginny stared at the ceiling with wide eyes. She hadn’t slept at all.

“I’ve done a thing.”

“What’s wrong?” Hermione pushed her hair away from her face.

Ginny looked over at her. Then reached across and set something down on Hermione’s hip.

A velvet box that Hermione had seen just last week.

“Oh, Ginny. No.” Hermione ran her hands over her face.

“So, it’s true?” Ginny’s eyes were wide and watery. “This is it?”

“Where did you get that?”

“He told you? This is real?”

Hermione bit her lip. “Yes, he told me.”

“When? Tonight at dinner?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Why do you have that?”

“He’s been off.” Ginny looked back at the ceiling. “He’s nervous and irritable and we’re fighting and then I got nervous so I went through his things.”

“What? Ginny…”

“Oh, don’t give me that moral high ground.” Ginny turned to her. “You snooped through your boyfriend’s memories.”

Hermione blushed at the term, and plucked the box from her hip, held it out to her. “You have to put it back. Put it back before he notices.”

Ginny ran her hands over Hermione’s sheets. “I was thinking,” she said, “I could keep it with me. Then meet him at dinner and while he’s super fidgety and upset, pull out the box and propose to *him*.” Ginny gave her maniacal grin.

Hermione blinked, watching an expression on her face that she’d usually seen on a pair of twins. “That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

“No, but it would be *funny*. Or maybe I could show up already wearing it and then he’d –“

“Ginny. Let your boyfriend propose to you. He only gets to do it once.”

Ginny swallowed and nodded at the ceiling. A smile spread slowly across her pink lips.

“I’m getting married to Harry Potter.”

Ginny turned to her, blush blossoming and running her freckles together. She giggled.

Hermione laughed. “Not unless you get that ring back to him, you’re not! He could very well die of an anxiety attack if he realizes it’s missing!”

Hermione handed the box back to her, and Ginny threw her arms around her, squeezing tightly.

~*~

She gripped her satchel bag to her chest. Hermione stood in the lifts to the office, a bit later than she would normally arrive.

Breathe. The worst thing would be if someone assumed something based on her inability to act casually. This was just another normal day.

Breathe.

The doors opened, and she was assaulted by floating hearts and pink streamers.

Fuck. It was Valentine's Day.

Melody smiled up at her.

"Good morning!"

Hermione mumbled something back and quickly turned right to head to her office. She felt tightness in her chest loosen, and she realized that Draco wasn't at the front with coffee, like he had been all last week.

Just another normal day.

She took a breath, and sat at her desk. Before she could decide what his absence could mean, Draco slid into her doorway, like a child wearing socks on a hardwood floor.

"Granger. Yes, good."

She was frozen. This man had been on top of her two days ago. He pushed his hair away from his face.

"Er, Senior Staff meeting at nine, and then we should meet about the Werewolf Policy financials. After lunch?"

His eyes were wide and there was pink on his cheekbones.

Was he embarrassed? Because she was mortified.

"Yes. Great," she said.

He nodded at her and then stepped out. She closed her eyes, rubbing at her temples.

Just another normal day.

"Er—" from the doorway. She looked up, and Draco was back. "Perhaps before lunch is better. If you're free."

"Yes. Great," she repeated.

He nodded and left. For good this time. She made sure.

Perhaps Walter should join them for the meeting? She couldn't imagine sitting alone with Draco in his office, trying to discuss financial allocations.

She breathed in deeply, and reached for her calendar and her quill. Her hand stopped in the air.

A to-go cup of steaming coffee sat next to her ink pot.

Normal.

Normal. Normal.

At five minutes to nine she and her coffee cup made their way through the disgustingly pink office, passing bowls of chocolates and candies. She slipped into the conference room and found several people already seated. Draco was absent.

There was a little pile of candy in front of every chair at the table and as she sat, Dorothea Bulstrode turned to her.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.” She pushed a little heart-shaped card at her, unsmiling, and then turned back to her chocolates.

“Er, thank you, Dorothea.”

Hermione opened the card, and it said *Have a great day*.

Since when did every single person celebrate Valentine’s Day by shoving it down your throat?

On cue, Blaise Zabini stormed into the room, fluttering hearts exploding into the air. “Happy Valentine’s Day, everybody!” Streamers flew, chocolate scattered everywhere, and the magic hearts fluttered like butterflies, zooming around the room.

“I expect you’ll be cleaning this up, Blaise?” Draco entered behind him, careful to not step on fallen chocolates.

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy, sir.”

Draco moved around the table, and Hermione felt very warm as she watched his body in a way she’d never watched him before. He wore a wizarding variation on a waistcoat, grey with a tie. It hugged him perfectly and Hermione shook the thoughts of his slender ribs out of her head as he sat.

She looked down at her chocolates, and clutched her coffee cup to keep her hands from reaching for them.

Draco took his seat next to her at the head of the table, and she couldn’t tell if he looked at her once, because she refused to look back at him.

“How was everyone’s weekend?” Draco asked as he organized the papers he’d brought in. Hermione caught herself watching his hands.

A few responses here and there, before Blaise spoke up.

“I was having a lovely time at the governor’s mansion before Granger came in a took all the attention.”

She looked over at him and he was grinning back at her. Hermione brought her coffee cup to her lips to distract herself.

“Yes. Blaise, Granger, and I attended the Valentine’s Ball on Saturday,” Draco said. “Blaise was able to secure a few accounts. Granger had a successful evening as well.”

She choked. Hot coffee, running down her airway.

Dorothea slammed her hand on her back.

Hermione nodded her thanks.

“The Werewolf Policy is now fully funded, and she’ll be working on publicity for the Golden Snidget campaign next,” Draco said. “Anything to add, Granger?”

She looked up at him and immediately blushed.

“Nope,” she said. “That about covers it.”

“And that was a nice feature Skeeter ran in yesterday’s *Prophet*,” Wentworth added. “Great publicity for the company and the two of you looked splendid!”

Alright, Wentworth. That was enough.

“Excuse me, Charles,” Blaise chimed in. “I was photographed on page three.”

The next hour was agony. She had no idea how he was able to lead a meeting, being in the same room as her, without looking like a complete fool. As Draco and Mockridge presented the projected budget for March, detailing areas where they needed to cut back or push forward, Hermione actively kept her eyes off of him.

Off of his hands. Off of his neck.

“And lastly,” Draco said. Off of his lips. “We’ve managed to fill the Wizengamot Relations position, and just in time, as our first Wizengamot date is in a few weeks. Cornelia Waterstone starts next Monday.”

Waterstone. That was the woman who Hermione had pushed for, who had great answers about office dynamics and a wonderful background in law.

Blaise pouted. She was also the least attractive woman who had been interviewed.

“Mr. Buckworth, our new Werewolf Policy investor, has delivered a fruit basket to us for Valentine’s Day. It’s up with Melody, so feel free to grab what you can before the Associates take it all.” Draco stood. “Granger and I will be working on financing now, but I’ll be available after lunch for anything.”

Now? Right now? He said before lunch, but it was 10AM. She blinked at the table.

The senior staff began standing and heading out. Blaise ran around all of them, looking for the fruit basket. She didn’t know how to gather up all her materials and her coffee cup in a timely manner with her hands shaking. She tossed her empty coffee cup in the wastebasket.

When she finally exited the conference room, Draco was waiting for her. He gestured for her to lead the way to his office.

Walter? She needed Walter. How in Merlin's name was she supposed to talk finances with him alone in his office.

She looked over to Melody's desk and found half the office surrounding the fruit basket, including Walter.

Perhaps she should suggest grabbing him?

They reached Draco's door and Hermione entered, clutching her notes. She moved to the center of the room and turned back to him, about to ask about Walter, and watched as he closed the door behind him.

He turned, and leaned back on the wood, placing his hands in his pockets.

Oh, god.

She pulled her notes across her chest like a shield, feeling the papers crinkle under her fingers.

He leveled his eyes on her, unreadable, but intense.

"Do you think you'll be able to keep quiet, Granger?"

She felt the words like a knife to her gut. That was it. They were going to ignore it, and move forward.

He didn't want her speaking to anyone about this. He didn't want her bringing it up with him…

He didn't want her.

"Yes." She nodded, looking down at the carpet, the space between their feet. "No, yes, I understand." Her stomach felt heavy.

Merlin, he was probably concerned about the Love Contract. Hermione would be, if she were in his shoes. Hermione held the power to destroy him and this company now. Did he honestly think she would?

She continued, "You don't need to worry about me. I won't speak of it."

She looked up at him, hating the way her vision blurred. She swallowed and tried to grin.

He was still, examining her. His eyes darted between her own, and his mouth was tight. There was a strain in his features that she recognized from Hogwarts.

If he wasn't still standing in front of the door, she would nod at him, grin, and excuse herself to go cry in her office. Perhaps she needed to say more?

“I’ll be able to keep quiet. Keep this to myself. We can pretend it never happened if that’s what you want.” She watched him blink at her. “You don’t need to be concerned with any of the legal ramifica—“

“Let me clarify,” he said, stepping off the door. “Do you think you’ll be able to keep quiet,” he repeated, moving toward her, face relaxing slightly, and the smallest smirk tugging at his lips, “or do I need to silence the room.”

She blinked at him. He stopped in front of her, hands still in his pockets, and lips twitching. She squeezed the papers in her fingers, across her chest.

He was… They were…

She swallowed, and wet her lips on accident. His eyes darkened.

“You’ll need to silence the room.”

He smirked at her, eyes flashing. While he muttered the silencing charm and the locking spell, she cast the contraceptive charm. She tossed her notes onto the couch and threw herself at him.

He stepped backwards with her momentum, hands coming to her hips as hers twisted into his hair, pulling his lips down to hers.

She brushed hurried kisses across his mouth before he finally reached up with a hand and held her face still as he deepened the kiss, parting her lips and tasting her. They both sighed, exhaling into each other.

“Merlin, I thought I lost you,” he sighed against her jaw as he worked his lips over towards her shoulder. The hand at her face slid into her hair.

She chuckled lowly. “*You* thought?” She gasped as he ran his teeth across an old bruise. He must love that spot. “You’re the one being so cagey—“

“I was aiming for playful,” he hissed into her ear.

“You’re always playful—“

He slipped the hand on her hip around to grab her, pulling her closer to his hips. She let her hands leave his hair and travel to the buttons on his waistcoat. As soon as the first button popped open, the hand in her hair gripped her, and even more of her neck was exposed to him.

Her fingers worked to remove all the buttons, and once he shrugged out of it, lips never leaving her neck, he moved both hands to her backside, grabbing her and lifting her up. She squeaked, grabbed his shoulders, and had a moment where she didn’t understand the point of it. She opened her eyes and they were face to face, and he started walking them towards the couch behind her.

But instead of the couch, he pressed her against the wall next to it. Just where she had stood for one of the poses in the first photoshoot. As he pressed her spine against the wall, moving his hands to the backs of her thighs, twisting them around his hips, she smiled that this was the place she'd been standing for the poses against the window. When Draco had walked in, sliding his jacket on, and seen her for the first time.

He kissed her again. And she found that the best way to keep from falling was to squeeze him and let his hips pin her against the wall. He groaned against her mouth.

One hand came up and began unbuttoning her blouse while the other moved slow circles on her thigh. As it was coming off of her, she thought of today's outfit – how pleased she had been that it was a very professional skirt/blouse combination and how badly she needed professionalism today.

"Er," Hermione said, as Draco popped the last button on her blouse and opened it wide to see her. "The paperwork? Are you worried about it at all?"

"The Werewolf financials? No, of course not." He palmed her through her bra.

She pressed her lips together, and tried to keep her eyes open. "I – I meant the… contract."

"Contract?" The hand rubbing circles on her thigh had somehow found its way between them, now rubbing her over her knickers. The other hand was now travelling around her back to her bra clasp.

She moaned. Then bit out, "The Love Contract."

Both hands stilled, and the hand pressing between them paused mid-rub, pressing over her sensitive spot.

Oh, god. Why was she talking?

She opened her eyes and his grey ones were watching her, pink on his cheeks.

"Are you worried about it?" he said, eyes darting back and forth between hers, and she was very aware of the hand pressing against her center, and she wished he would either remove it or *move* it.

"Only in the sense that I signed a document promising not to do this." She squeezed her thighs around his hips – *accidentally,* of course – and somehow it pushed them together, his hand pressing firm to her core. She gasped, eyelids fluttering, and tried to keep herself from doing it again.

When her eyes focused on him, his smirk was back, and the fingers searching for the clasp on her bra continued their journey. He answered, "Only in the sense that I *created* a document to keep us from doing this."

Her bra snapped open, and his fingers dipped below her knickers.

"And to keep Blaise away from Melody," he added, kissing her neck.

“Well, that’s not working.” She chuckled against his temple. Her thighs were shaking as he ran a finger along her center, moving up to press against her bud, and her whole body shivered. He circled her, running in different directions, and his other arm came around her waist to support her. Her bra momentarily forgotten, hanging off her shoulders.

“We can discuss it later, I guess.” She mumbled in between gasps. “It’s a common contract for businesses, especially privately owned. I’ve looked it up.”

“Shh.” Against her ear. “You can teach me later.”

She felt him smile against her ear, and she responded with one of her own. She was just wondering if her hands should be doing something, seeing as his were doing *all the things* when she felt two fingers run towards her opening and push inside of her.

She yelped. The pinching was back, but it wasn’t good. It felt so much more tender than it had two days ago. It was like she’d pulled muscles, but they were *inside*.

“What’s wrong?”

Draco pulled out of her. She had her eyes squeezed shut and her hands fisted in his shirt. She remembered what Ginny told her, about needing to wait a few days before trying again. She took a slow breath in and opened her eyes, embarrassed that her vision was wet.

“I’m fine,” she tried, smiling. “Just sore. Keep going.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“I’m fine,” she repeated. She slid her hands up into his hair and pulled his lips to hers. He kissed her, then stepped backwards, moving them off the wall, turning, and deposited her on the arm of the black leather couch.

Her shaking legs thanked him, but she still held him close, worried that they were stopping.

“Don’t stop. I’m fine,” she breathed against his neck. “I want this.”

He shivered, and pulled back to look at her. He grabbed her hips, pulling her to the edge, and slid his hand back under her knickers. He flicked her twice, watching her pull her lip between her teeth, before swirling down and pressing one long finger into her.

Yes, this was nice. She sighed as he pumped in and out of her several times, twisting and then pressing on her again, flicking her, swirling her. She pressed against his hand, trying to meet his rhythm.

“Draco, I’m ready. I’m ready, please.” She looked up at him. He was holding himself up with one hand on the arm of the couch next to her, leaning down to her level. He watched her as he slipped out, and then tried pressing two fingers back inside.

She bit her lip, squeaking, and knew her eyes were pressed closed. It was like her body didn’t want to do this, but it did at the same time. She opened her eyes and nodded at him. “That’s fine. I’m ready.” She nodded vigorously, clenching her jaw.

He raised a brow at her, suspiciously, and tried moving inside of her. She gripped his arms, surprised that his shirt was still on, and attempted to control her facial expressions.

He frowned at her and removed his hand, standing up tall.

“No, no. Draco I’m ready.” She pulled her bra off, tossing it away, and reached up to start unbuttoning his shirt. She watched his eyes slide across her chest, proud of the way he licked his lips. He slipped his shirt off his shoulders once she was done.

She hesitated, then reached for his belt. She watched the muscles in his stomach tighten, and his arms twitched, like he would stop her. Once the belt was open, she looked up at him. His chest was heaving, and she got to run her eyes over his skin.

She started unbuttoning his trousers, trying to ignore the bulge pressing against the front. His hands clenched into fists as she undid the lower buttons, and she knew her fingers were brushing against him.

Good. He’d done something similar to her on Saturday night, and she felt the skin on her exposed chest shiver at the memory of him taking his pants off against her stomach. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her breasts pull into taut peaks.

She purposefully let her fingers scrape down the tent in his trousers as she finished with the last of the buttons, and just when she thought she had the upper hand, he reached forward and cupped a breast. Her fingers stuttered over him as he pulled at her, rolling her, tracing her underside and then rubbing his thumb over her.

It took her thirty seconds to remember how to undo the last button on his trousers. She was panting. She reached up to his waistline, ready to pull his pants down, and he switched hands, pulling and plucking at her other breast. He pinched her and she moaned, dropping her head onto his stomach, hands resting on his hips still. He continued running his thumb in tight circles around her, over and over, never edging closer and she panted against his stomach, watching his muscles shake.

Could this put her over the edge? She realized she was shifting her hips against the couch, trying to find friction. Her knickers were still on, so she widened her legs, trying to pull the fabric closer to her bud, slightly embarrassed at all the moisture.

It helped a little. She moaned as he finally pulled at her breast. She could feel it rising in her, and she was just about to bring her hands to her core when Draco dropped his hand from her chest, pulled his trousers down, and knelt in front of her.

His eyes were hot, looking up at her, and his tongue ran across his teeth as he reached up and started tugging her knickers down.

“Oh, god, yes.”

She lifted her hips and then she was only wearing her skirt. She was ready. She would grit her way through this if it meant he kept looking at her like this. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss against her knee. She bit her lip.

He watched her as he pressed another kiss against her leg, a little higher. Then another. He was halfway up her thigh before she realized what he was going to do.

“Oh – I… er…” She blushed. “You don’t… That’s…”

He puffed air against her and she clenched, instinctively trying to close her legs around something, and realized he had her held open, one hand on the inside of each knee.

“Granger, why don’t you tell me the history of the Giant Squid in the Hogwarts lake?” He licked his lips, and pressed another kiss higher on her thigh, watching her with hot eyes.

She blinked at him, hands tightening around the leather couch.

“What?” She gasped.

“It was deposited there in 1306, yes?” He breathed against her again, and she groaned.

“No, it was there from the beginning. The founders –“

And he kissed her right on her core. She couldn’t define the sound that was wrenched out of her lungs, but she dug her fingers into the leather, and tried bringing her knees together again. He ran his hands halfway up her thighs, still held open.

“Yes? The founders?” He lifted an innocent brow at her, and waited.

“The f-founders placed Hogwarts castle on the—“ He dipped his head, still looking into her eyes. “The – the grounds, next to the black lake.” She could feel his breath on her. “So, the giant squid was there all alo- oh!” His tongue. He was… He was pushing his tongue against her. Starting from below and licking upward.

This was… far too intimate. She couldn’t…

Hermione brought her hands up to her face, pressing her eyes closed as he started another slow swipe.

“And the squid,” he mumbled into her. “It’s a greenish color, yes?”

“No, it’s r-red.” She curled her fingers against her face. “Dark red. Almost purple.” Her thighs were starting to fight him now, shaking. She either wanted to close them and push him out, or hold him there. She hadn’t decided.

“It’s killed people, I’ve heard.”

“No, no.” She moaned as he licked at her again. “It’s very docile. Helpful even. It’s had sev- several quarrels with the merpeople but –“ And his lips closed around her bud. And sucked.

She gasped, and her hands grappled for his hair, trying to hold on.

“Oh, god Draco. Please!”

“What about the merpeople?”

She dragged her nails through his scalp, pinching her eyes closed, afraid to look down at him.

“In 1497 the merpeople revolted, and – and – and –“ He was lapping at her, trying different rhythms, different pressure. “And they – and they tried to – “

She realized that she was pushing her hips against him, dragging his face closer with every flick of his tongue. But she guessed he’d stop her if he cared. She twisted his hair around her fingers and she felt him groan against her. She bucked her hips forward at the vibrations.

“They tried – The merpeople tried to – tried to –“

She was like a broken record, she couldn’t go on. She didn’t dare open her eyes. She was afraid to see him between her thighs, knowing it would burn into her memory forever.

“Ugh, Draco, please.”

And she felt the press of a finger inside of her, his mouth still working above. She began to splinter, reaching an edge, and she could hear her own voice saying a number of things, and making little breathy moans in time with his tongue, and she could feel him grunting and breathing hard against her.

She screamed as she broke apart. She pressed her hips against his mouth, holding him there. She had her hands tangled in his hair, and her thighs clenched closed around his neck. He continued flicking his tongue across her, as she pulsed. When she was done and couldn’t handle it anymore, she released him.

He pulled his finger from her, and she almost fell backwards and down onto the couch cushions, forgetting there was nothing behind her. She grabbed at the backrest of the couch to hold herself up, and slowly opened her eyes when she heard him moving.

A quick sound, in time with his breathing. And she saw the top of his head from where he knelt in front of her, hair twisted and slick. His eyes were dark and deep as he ran his gaze from her exposed folds, up to her bare chest, and further to her face. He bit his lip, and groaned, and she suddenly realized that he was finishing himself.

She blinked and looked away, unsure if she was supposed to see. Of course. He *should*. She hadn’t really done all that much for him.

A cut off cry, and she knew he was finished. He must have painted the side of the couch. He dropped his head onto her inner thigh breathing harshly against her. The lock of blond hair that always fell across his forehead was misbehaving again, and Hermione bit her lip and decided that she was allowed to push it back for him.

As her fingers brushed behind his ear, his eyes connected with hers. He pressed a kiss against her thigh, and lifted his head off of her.

“So,” he whispered, voice hoarse. “Do you think you have a handle on the Werewolf financials?” He smirked up at her.

She couldn't help but smile down on him. "I don't know," she said. "You may have to go over that last part again."

His eyes flashed at her. "I'll schedule a meeting tomorrow at lunch."

~*~

Tuesday at lunch, Draco taught her a valuable lesson about the wonders of dry-humping. As she lay on her back on the leather couch, with Draco moving deliciously against her, she thought it was just about time to remove their underthings and get to it.

But Draco brought her right to the edge, and followed her over it. Again, another mess on the couch.

She pieced together that Draco was wary about entering her again. She did them both the favor of trying a few things in the shower Wednesday morning, making her feel like she was quite ready to try again.

On Wednesday's lunchtime "meeting," she attempted telling Draco this without so many words, and even found her way into his pants for the first time. He let her stroke him and try things and he'd tell her what worked and what would feel better. He had her pressed up against the door, barely letting her through it before slamming her back, but now his head was resting on her shoulder as she pulled at him. When he grabbed her hips, squeezing, she knew it was about time.

She released him and shimmied out of her dress, stepping out of her underwear too. He watched her as she dropped his trunks to the floor, and she pulled him against her, biting her lip. She found a way to get back into the position they had been in on Monday, her legs around his hips and his hips about to pound her into the door.

She didn't know much about how to… position oneself... Nor was she in a great position to start the momentum, but she knew she was ready, and he was still watching her, frowning at her, but hard against her.

She kissed him, trying to rub herself against him again, grabbing at his hair and biting his lips, and he pulled away about to tell her she didn't have to.

She lifted a brow, mimicking him. "Don't be such a Hufflepuff about it, Draco."

His jaw dropped, his eyes wide. She smirked and he kissed it off of her. When he entered her, it was tight again, but nothing like the pain had been on Monday. Once she had convinced him for the third time that he could go faster, the way his hips snapped her against the door had it rattling in its frame.

They paused, listening to the echo, wondering if they could hear it outside the silenced room. He laughed, moving them off the door and against the wall next to it.

On Thursday, she had to sit through an entire meeting with Draco and Mr. Buckworth in her office. She sat behind her desk, with Draco staring at her while Mr. Buckworth and she discussed the Werewolf Policy.

At the end, Draco offered to walk Mr. Buckworth to the lifts. When he returned, he locked the door and silenced the room.

Hermione swallowed.

Five minutes later, she was sitting on the edge of her desk, hooking her leg around Draco's hips, letting him undress her.

He *did* sweep his arm across her desk, throwing everything onto the floor, and they *did* laugh about it.

On Friday, they were back in his office. She started to feel guilty about never discussing work with him, so she tried to talk about the progress on the Snidget project while he undressed her. He let her talk, sucking at her neck and placing her on his desk.

When she laid back, she realized that everything was already cleared from his desk, and decided to just let the cool marble sink into her sink as he worked off her laced shoes.

Once her shoes were off, he kissed her heel, and then her calf, and continued to drop sucking kisses up her legs, ghosting over her knickers, and then sliding up her stomach. He dipped to the right, and tried to place a kiss on each rib.

The marble was digging into her fingers as she grabbed the edges of the desk, and he was halfway up her chest when he pulled back, staring down at her.

He frowned.

"What?"

He let his hand run across her ribs, looking down at her strangely.

"Are you sick?"

Her brows came together. "Sick?"

"You're thin." He pressed a finger lightly in between two ribs.

She blinked up at him. "Thank you?"

This was the time to discuss this?

"Thinner."

She laughed. "I haven't had lunch in five days." She chuckled, reaching for him.

He blinked at her.

And that was how Hermione found herself eating a salad in Draco's office.

He'd straightened his clothes, and poked his head out to ask his secretary – *Carrie.* Carrie the Secretary. How had it been that easy? – to order them lunch from the café around the corner.

He'd come back to her, made her scream, and then instead of getting her clothes on, fixing her hair, and making her way across the floor back to her office, they'd sat on the leather couch, eating the food delivery.

It was… awkward. Almost like a date. When the silence and crunching had gone on long enough, she started talking about work. He was much more amenable to a back and forth now, and they ended up making a plan for the first week of Wizengamot hearings in March.

"Will you be at Cornerstone this weekend?" he asked her as he crumbled up the wrappings for his sandwich.

She chewed, pushing at her cucumbers and wondering what the right answer to this question was.

"Yes." She pressed her lips together. "Will you?"

"Maybe Sunday." He brushed a few crumbs off the couch and vanished them.

She bit back a grin. "Is there a book you need?"

"Something like that."

She looked up at him and he was smirking at her. She started organizing her remaining tomatoes with her fork.

Her smile fell as she thought of the way he disappeared to New York, or the cagey meeting he had with Slughorn at the governor's ball, or the response from Noelle that she was still waiting on. She wanted to know things about him still, wanted to know how he spent his time.

"What do you have tomorrow?" She couldn't fight the blush that rose on her neck.

He paused before answering, and she looked up at him. He was staring at the carpet.

"I'm visiting my father."

Oh. No, never mind. There were some things she didn't want to know.

"Is … is everything alright? Or…?"

"It was part of his conditions to the inheritance. That I visit him on the monthly visitations in January and February." His voice was clipped and his jaw clenched.

It wasn't the *only* conditions…

And she wondered when it was that he visited Lucius in January.

Hermione nodded, like Draco had just said something she agreed with, and continued to build huts with her vegetables.

Her salad container was taken from her, and she looked up as Draco was moving it to the floor, and moving to kiss her.

She smiled against him as he leaned across her to press their lips together.

“Ugh,” he said, pulling back. “You taste like bleu cheese.” He wrinkled his nose.

She laughed and held onto his shoulders. She knew from watching him in the Great Hall that he hated bleu cheese dressing. “If you’d told me we’d be kissing again, I wouldn’t have ordered it,” she mumbled against his mouth.

“No, no. It’s your favorite.”

He kissed her. And her chest was warm.

He’d watched her in the Great Hall too.

~*~

Monsieur DuBois had her yawning. She was doing a fantastic job of hiding her gaping mouth every time he brought up Renaissance artwork and how it clashes terribly with Venetian rugs.

They met every Saturday afternoon at a Muggle cafe that seemed to be Monsieur DuBois's favorite place. They knew him by name there. Hermione ordered an espresso drink that day, because her eyes could not keep open. She was just letting the breeze from the outdoor patio they were on lull her, and the sun across her forehead warm her.

"Da Vinci was, of course, a Squib --"

This caught Hermione's ears. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Monsieur DuBois raised a calculated brow at her. "I said, Leonardo da Vinci was a Squib. His great grandfather was the Italian Minister of Magic in 1414."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "I... had never heard of that. Do you happen to know of any books on the topic that I could look into?"

"Well," Monsieur DuBois shifted in his chair, crossing his legs and turning slightly away from her. "I've seen it on a family tree."

"Hmm." Hermione pursed her lips.

The waiter came over, flirted a bit with Monsieur DuBois, and took their food order. Hermione truly hated the salads at this cafe. She had now tried every salad on the menu and not a one of them was filling or tasty. She decided on a bowl of soup today.

She glanced at her timepiece as inconspicuously as possible, but it wasn't good enough.

"Do you have somewhere to be, Miss Granger?"

She looked up at him. "No, no. Just... checking the time, Monsieur."

She sipped her espresso.

Monsieur DuBois pulled out a book of Renaissance decor, and started discussing the styles, the architecture. He began detailing the proper maintenance of a Renaissance mansion, and what a proper remodel would include.

The sun had just started slanting into Hermione's eyes as Monsieur DuBois explained the truly *disastrous* remodel that the French Minister had attempted. He began chuckling at things that Hermione couldn't possibly understand. She grinned as best she could.

The waiter's shadow falling across her face when he returned to their table shook Hermione out of her trance a bit. She waited for her soup to be set down in front of her, grateful for the shield from the sun.

When Monsieur DuBois stopped speaking, and no soup was set before her, Hermione looked up at the person shading her from the sun, and her blood ran cold to see Draco, jaw tight, but smiling down at Monsieur DuBois.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Monsieur DuBois chirped. "My, you look splendid. Would you like to join us?"

Hermione felt the caffeine in her stomach turn and tumble as she watched Draco grin at the older man, shaking his hand. She concentrated on forcing her lungs to expand.

"I apologize, Monsieur, but something has come up actually," Draco said. She watched his face tighten and twitch even as he smiled. "Miss Granger will not be able to finish her lesson today."

Lesson.

There was no way around it. He knew. Lucius told him.

She swallowed.

"Oh," Monsieur DuBois pouted, looking back and forth between them. "I do hope everything is alright."

She watched Malfoy blink at him. He turned his eyes on her, hot and aggressive. "I'm afraid not."

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

I'm aliiiiive! :)

Thank you all for bearing with me as I moved cross country these past few weeks. I'm so honored by all the comments and all the checking in, and I'm sorry for the wait! Three things:

1- I am so incredibly honored to let you know that I have been nominated in several categories in the Enchanted Awards this year. Starting March 18 you can vote for semi-finals, so please check out all the amazing work going on by all these amazing authors, and send in a vote!

2- God bless those who post and host writing sprints on Dramione Fanfiction Forum (another amazing Facebook group). You can totally feel personally responsible that this chapter got out this week instead of next. ;)

3- And finally, I believe it is safe to say that this story will be 36 chapters long. (And you have no idea how upset I am that I couldn't make it 35, like 35,000 galleons -_-) - but do not be sad, as you should be verrry excited by the upcoming Draco POV and the Auction AU.

Thanks again to all of you. And thanks for reading this incredibly long author's note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Miss Granger will not be able to finish her lesson today."

She swallowed.

"Oh," Monsieur DuBois pouted, looking back and forth between them. "I do hope everything is alright."

He turned his eyes on her, hot and aggressive. "I'm afraid not."

She took a shaky inhale, and began moving her napkin off her lap. Draco placed a handful of galleons on the table, apologizing to Monsieur DuBois, and promising to say hello to his mother.

As she stood from the table, gathering her notes, Draco's hand came up to guide her elbow around the gate, and onto the sidewalk. He waved a jaunty hand at the interior design teacher before escorting her in the direction of the nearest Apparition point.

They had eight blocks. There were storm clouds in the sky.

He dropped her elbow after the first block. She struggled to match his pace.

He started popping knuckles and cracking his neck after the second block, narrowly missing getting hit by a cab.

"Draco --"

"How long have you been plotting with my father."

She looked up at him as they stopped at a busy corner. His eyes were hot, scanning the streets, and darting around her.

"You say it like we're working together," she said.

"Aren't you?" He heaved a breath in. Then walked when the signal turned.

It took her a moment to comprehend. He left her on the curb, and she struggled to catch up.

"What did he tell you? If he defines it as anything other than *blackmail* then he lied to you –"

"You're not the only one who had a deal with him, Granger." She heard his voice shake. She watched him swallow as they darted around a group of children. "You shouldn't have gotten involved in this."

She skipped over a few curbs to catch up to him as he powered through the street.

"How did you find me there?" She tried sticking to the easy questions.

"I asked Madame Michele for your schedule."

She looked down at her quickly moving feet. He'd gone to Madame Michele first, disturbed her morning, and then tracked her down. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to calm him.

She heard him chuckle, and watched him shake his head at something running through his mind.

"You're done with those classes," he hissed.

She reached for him, but stopped herself. They were on the seventh block. One more before they could Apparate. The crowd thinned as the Muggle-Repelling Charm shivered over them.

"What about the money, Draco? The next three installments?"

"I told him to shove them up his ass," he snarled.

They approached a small alleyway before the end of the block. If she could get him to calm down before they Apparated...

"We need that money, Draco. Malfoy Consulting is barely afloat as it is. I need to keep going to those classes --"

"No!" He grabbed her elbow and brought her into the small alley, just shy of the Apparition point. The rest of the Muggles continued on with their day, pulling out umbrellas. He pointed a finger in her face. "You are not to step foot in that tea room again, do you hear me, Granger?"

His eyes were burning into her.

"The business is more important than some insane classes, Draco!"

He grabbed her shoulders, just firm enough to press her against the brick.

"*Nothing* is more important than you."

She lost her breath as he sucked in a shaky gasp. His fingers twitched on her shoulders and his eyes danced back and forth between her own.

And then he kissed her. Both hands up her neck to her face, tilting her head back for him as he stepped closer to her.

She was shaking as she brought her hands up to his sides. She let him dominate her mouth, taking time to breathe when she could, but his body pressed her against the alley wall and his hands held her still as he moved his lips against her.

She felt him slide one hand down her cheek, down her neck, across her ribs and grab her hip, as his mouth kissed her hotly on her jaw.

“Did he ever touch you?”

The harsh whisper crashed over her, and she opened her eyes. She focused on the packing crates and old boxes in the alley.

“N-no. Nothing like that.” She felt a cold chill that Draco could even wonder…

Draco threaded his fingers through her hair and tugged until her neck was open to his mouth. His lips moved across her jaw, up to her ear.

“Have you been to see him since you went in November?”

The hand on her hips squeezed as his breath misted over her neck.

“No, we’ve written – He’s written letters.” She hummed. “Threats.” Could she call it threats?

Draco attached to her neck and began sucking and biting on his favorite spot. She felt his hips press into hers and the hand on her hip start to slide. She saw Muggles walking by the alley entrance, completely unaware of them due to the repelling charm.

“Tell me about the letters. Tell me what he said to you.”

Draco bit down on her neck a bit too hard. Claiming her. Marking her. Hermione winced and reached her hands up to his face.

“Draco, stop.” She pulled his face back to look into his eyes. They were clouded, still hot but there was an aggression there she didn’t recognize. “I know what you’re doing, Draco, and stop.” She rubbed her thumb across his cheek, calming him. “This… what we have is very special to me and you’re turning it into something ugly.”

She watched as he closed his eyes, pressed his forehead against hers and tried to relax. She was curious to know why Lucius affected him so much, but she was also scared to find out.

He placed a soft kiss on her lips and pulled back, lifting his hips away from her.

“What did my father say to you in Azkaban?”

She breathed in deeply, wishing to be talking about anything else. She heard thunder.

“He gave me a list of things. To work on.”

She looked up at Draco, arms-length away from her, hands still resting lightly on her hips. He narrowed his eyes.

“For what?”

Oh, god. She felt the blush spreading up her jaw. “To be… to be seen with you. To be worthy of you.” To be a Malfoy bride…

His frown deepened. “In November?” He looked to the side, thinking. “You weren’t even with the company yet.” His hands dropped from her hips and she felt like she could breathe again.

“Yes, but we were being pictured together so often. And… and he knew about the Auction.”

She watched as Draco’s eyes flipped to her. He wasn’t surprised. He looked wary, if anything.

She continued, “He knew that you’d gone to Narcissa’s mother. He knew that – that you would have saved me.” This caught him off guard though. His left eye twitched. “He thought we were together. Had been for ages. I – I corrected him, of course,” she said. She wanted to cross her arms, or pick at her nails, but she refrained. “But then later, he had photographs of… the Marcus Flint incident.”

She looked up at him, afraid to bring that up, but he already knew that too. He wasn’t surprised one bit that Lucius had photographs of them grabbing at each other in an alley way, not so different from the one they were currently in. She filed this away for later as a raindrop hit her cheek.

“He was disappointed that I’d lied to him about us.” She sniffed. “And he said he wouldn’t release your inheritance if I didn’t go to those classes.” She looked over his shoulder. She felt so small, admitting this weakness. Admitting to being blackmailed.

“What was on the list?” he grit out. His eyes were dark with anger, but she knew it wasn’t directed at her this time.

She recited them. She found herself stuttering over some of them, the ones that were clearly meant for a wife, not a girlfriend, or whatever it was they were doing. *Financially knowledgeable. Obedient. Skilled in hosting. Trained in décor.* Her face flushed as he listened, watching her, unmoving.

“He said the only thing he could part with was pure-blood.”

And Draco laughed. The sound shook her, and the sky thundered with him. He stepped away from her, chuckling, bringing his hands to rub his eyes. He turned his back to her and she saw his head shaking as he laughed. He took a shaky breath in.

“Why did you do this, Granger.”

She stared at his back, still marveling over his reaction.

“I’ll finish these next three weeks, Draco, and then you’ll be done with him. You’ll not owe him anything. You’ll be rid of him.”

“No, no.” His voice bounced around the bricks and she saw him pull his hands across the skin of his face. “I’ll never be rid of him.” He turned to her. “He’s got his hooks in you, now.”

She shivered, unsure. “What do you mean?”

“I’d seen it, but I ignored it.” He stepped back to her, eyes sad. “You’re different. The way you drink your coffee is different. The way you walk. The way you dance.” He placed his hand on her cheek. “You’re changing. And now every time I see you lift your saucer with your cup, I’ll think of him. Think of this. When you curtsey. When you shake hands.” He brushed his thumb across her lip. She felt a tear drop leave her eyes. “Why did you do this.”

She sniffed again, seeing the light rain drops hit the crates behind him. She wished she had the Gryffindor courage to tell him why, to tell him it was for him. So, she settled for the next

best answer.

“It was the right thing to do.”

They stared into each other’s eyes, raindrops falling on their lashes. He pressed his lips against her forehead, kissing her eyebrow, her temple, her cheekbone. He made a path toward her lips.

And they kissed in the rain.

~*~

He escorted her to Cornerstone for the rest of her shift. She was ready to say goodbye to him at the door, but he followed her in, shaking the rain off the umbrella he’d transfigured.

Morty greeted him and they chatted briefly as she got behind the register again. When Morty bid them a good afternoon and headed upstairs, Draco stayed.

He browsed the books and watched her help customers. He eyed the hag warily, but he mainly stayed out of her way.

By four o’clock as the people who had waited out the storm by staying inside the bookstore were just starting to leave, she was far more aware of his eyes on her. She filed books, passing his chair and feeling him watch her. She’d look over at him though, and find him reading, eyes on his book. She’d make notes in the ledger book and feel the hair on her arm bristle.

By five o’clock he wasn’t even reading anymore. There were only two other people in the shop, most people put off by the bad weather, and he sat in his chair and watched her move about the shop. She’d look over at him, as if to catch him, and he just stared back at her. It started to make her warm.

At fifteen minutes to closing, the last of the shoppers were making their final purchases, and he came to lean against the stacks near the counter. His eyes were dark whenever she looked over at him. She stumbled through the last transactions, and once the last shopper had waved goodbye, she pointed her wand at the *Open* sign, turning it to *Closed*.

She swallowed, and looked over at him. He leaned his left hip against the book stacks, legs crossed at the ankle. He had his arms crossed over his chest, one hand at his chin, thumb against his lips. She watched his lips part and his thumb dipped inside.

She took a deep, steadying breath, and tried not to lick her lips.

“We’re closed for today, Mr. Malfoy,” she said. “Is there anything I can put on hold for you, for tomorrow?” She bit back a grin as he lifted a brow at her.

He prowled toward the counter.

“Are you quite sure there’s nothing on reserve for me back there?” He tipped his head to the side as he leaned forward on his elbows in front of her.

She smiled at him. “I can check.” She turned around, knowing full well that the reserve shelf was empty. She bit her lip, hoping she was doing something slightly attractive, and bent at the waist, bringing her head down to the shelf, and straightening her back to push out her denim clad backside. She braced her hands on the counter.

“Hm. Nothing here for you.” She turned her head to look at him, a grin on her face.

His eyes were hot. And they were glued to her. More specifically, to her behind.

His gaze flipped to her eyes, and he smirked. “Mind if I take a look?”

She pressed her lips together, and nodded. “Be my guest.” She turned back to the shelf, keeping her hands pressed against the counter, her hips pushing out, and her spine straight and long. She heard him coming around the counter. He slipped behind her, brushing his hips against her backside. She bit her lip too keep from making a sound.

“How strange,” he said. She saw his larger hand rest next to hers on the counter. She felt the other rest on her ribs as he leaned down over her, pressing his chest against her back. He placed his face next to hers. “I could have sworn something back here was mine.”

She let out a short laugh, and then pressed back against him, feeling his hips just behind her. The hand on her ribs, skirted up and pressed firmly against her breast over her shirt.

She knew the sign said *Closed.* She knew that Morty rarely came downstairs to check on her after six. And she knew that the foot traffic at this time of day was light. And it was all warming her blood.

His fingers tweaked her through her bra, and she gasped. He pressed firmly against her backside, and she could feel him hard against her.

“I think we could find what you’re looking for in the non-fiction section,” she whispered, turning to look at him as his lips were about to start in on her neck.

He grinned. “The customer service here is impeccable.”

~*~

On Sunday morning, Hermione had written to Madame Bernard to letting her know that she needed to reschedule the hosting class she usually had with her on Sundays. She made sure to use the word “reschedule” and not “discontinue.” Also on Sunday, the announcement of Harry and Ginny’s engagement was in the papers as well. Hermione had convinced Ginny to let Harry propose at dinner on Valentine’s Day, and she hadn’t seen much of the two of them since.

Harry had been rather proactive with Skeeter. He contacted her to set up an interview on Saturday for Sunday’s paper, to prevent any tabloid responses. It had resulted in a lovely, in-depth article about the two of them (and a bit about the history of the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Died-And-Lived-Again).

Hermione smiled down at the article at Cornerstone on Sunday.

She smiled for many reasons that day, one of which was the book on reserve behind the counter that had been there when she'd opened up. Draco must have written to Morty early this morning to have the book on reserve for him, and while the two of them had made no plans to see each other today after parting the night before, she was giddy thinking of him coming by again.

She was still grinning at the counter as a customer left and the door admitted Narcissa Malfoy.

Hermione blinked at her – long royal blue robes, hanging off of her like water, delicate fingers letting the door close behind her. She looked up at Hermione, and smiled.

It was like a piece of Hermione's soul had been out of alignment for months, and it had just clicked back into place.

"Hermione, my dear," Narcissa said from the doorway. Her eyes sparkled as she ascended the steps and arrived at the counter.

"Hello, Narcissa." Hermione couldn't clear the smile off her face. She had the sudden thought that Narcissa had no idea that Hermione had been shagging her son senseless for the past week, and she hoped she wouldn't mind terribly.

"It's wonderful to see you." Narcissa floated to the counter and settled a knowing stare on her.

Perhaps thinking about shagging Draco right now was not the best idea.

"Are you here for the book on reserve?" Hermione turned away from Lady Malfoy and tried to shake her head clear of the image of Draco above her.

"Yes, thank you, dear," Narcissa said. "And of course, to visit with you, as long as the shop stays relatively calm."

Hermione turned back, holding the reserve bag, and found Narcissa's kind eyes on her. And Hermione wondered if she knew about the classes. If Draco had told her.

"Of course. How have you been?"

"Quite well, thank you," Narcissa said, and Hermione studied the quirk of her lips and considered if Narcissa used the makeup brands that Pansy used on her. "I saw the pictures from the governor's ball last weekend. You looked magnificent."

Hermione focused on keeping any blush off of her cheeks as she responded, "Thank you. I was happy to be representing Malfoy Consulting with Draco that night. We made some wonderful connections."

"You know, Hermione, dear," Narcissa began, and Hermione felt her heart leap at all the different possible directions this could go. "You must be done with those books that you borrowed in the fall."

Hermione looked at her, eyes wide and frozen. The books that should have been returned in December. The books that should have been owled back to Narcissa the moment she fled from Malfoy Manor after the visit to Azkaban. She was done with the books. And it was completely inappropriate for her to still have them in her possession. It was improper.

"I – yes, I have actually finished with them." Hermione could feel the heat fighting its way up her neck. "I apologize for holding onto them for so long." She looked down at the counter. "I will owl them back to you this evening –"

"Oh, no rush, dear."

Hermione looked up and Narcissa waved the air with her hand.

She continued, "I was thinking you could come by this Saturday and exchange them for others." Narcissa tilted her head at her, and her long blonde hair fell down her shoulder.

Hermione realized her mouth was still open, so she closed it.

"If you have the time, I could have dinner prepared as well." Narcissa flashed her teeth. "I know Mippy would love to see you again."

Hermione stared at her. She collected herself and responded, "Yes, that's… that's so kind of you, Narcissa. I would love to come for dinner this Saturday."

"Good." Narcissa grinned. "Then it's settled."

Hermione blinked several times before realizing that she was still holding the bag with Narcissa's book, and quickly jotted the notes in the ledger, feeling Narcissa's eyes on her.

"I'm so glad you're reading this author," Hermione said, attempting small talk. "Percival Hawk is truly coming into his own. Have you read his earlier work as well?"

Hermione looked up and Narcissa was watching her hands move over the ledger book.

"Yes, I have. I have always been a fan of his."

"I like this new one a lot," Hermione said as she placed it back in the bag. "He's improved so much as a writer. I know he's really been trying to better himself, studying quite a bit from his contemporaries and taking classes at the Muggle universities. I think it shows."

"That's lovely to hear," Narcissa said. She reached for the bag. "But Mr. Hawk had a lovely following before he tried changing himself." Narcissa raised a brow at her. "I know I always liked him, even without the… classes."

Hermione blinked as Narcissa nodded her head in goodbye, hiding a secret on her lips.

So she *did* hear about the lessons.

~*~

"NARCISSA MALFOY FILES FOR DIVORCE"
By Rita Skeeter

Narcissa Malfoy (née Black) will be Malfoy no longer. A very uncommon thing to do in pure-blood marriages, the youngest Black sister filed for divorce Monday morning.

Ms. Narcissa Black was not available for comment, but the paperwork filed in the Wizengamot cited "irreconcilable differences" with her soon-to-be ex-husband. Lucius Malfoy was convicted in 1998 for his support of You-Know-Who during the Second Wizarding War.

Azkaban visitor records show that Narcissa has visited her husband on his monthly visitations consistently for the past two years, until their son Draco was released from Azkaban, taking her place as the primary visitor. Records show that the last time Narcissa Black visited Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban was December 1, 1999.

Who's to say how this came about, or if Ms. Black's decision was caused by a specific incident. Stick with this reporter, and I'm positive we can get down to the bottom of this together.

Hermione couldn't believe the words on the page. She couldn't decide if she was more shocked at Narcissa, or shocked at Skeeter for publishing such an article.

She filed away the information that Rita had been able to procure the visitor records from Azkaban, and therefore knew that Hermione had visited Lucius in November. She'd have to consider that later.

No, what she truly couldn't wrap her brain around was a pure-blood witch of such social standing filing for divorce.

She wondered what the pre-nuptial agreements were like in the wizarding world, if any, and hoped Narcissa had financial stability moving forward.

Hermione finished sipping her morning coffee, checked her shoddy makeup work in the mirror one last time before heading to the office.

As she stood in the elevator heading to Malfoy Consulting Group, she wondered how Draco was taking it. From what she understood of their messy family relationship, there would be no tears shed most likely. But it still must feel like the end of something.

The elevator doors opened and Draco stood at the reception desk, coffee cup in hand.

He winked at her.

And she suddenly remembered she was shagging this man. She blushed in a particularly telling way and stepped off the lift, taking the offered coffee cup and whispering a "Good morning."

"Senior staff meeting at ten, then we should meet this afternoon about the Golden Snidget campaign." Draco walked her to her office door like normal. "After our lunch, of course."

She looked up at him, and his bedroom eyes in the middle of the office floor made her feel reckless. So, they would be having "lunch" again this week.

"Lunch," she said. "Yes." Hermione looked over his shoulder and found Walter busy with a file. "And what were you planning to order today?"

His lips twitched. "I have a few ideas," he said. "But I'm open to suggestions." His eyes flashed at her, and she looked down at the carpets to keep from devouring him.

He pivoted away from her, but before he could get more than a few steps, she called out, "Er, Draco?" When he looked back to her, she nodded her head towards her office and stepped just inside the door. He joined her in the doorway, leaning against it. She lowered her voice.

"I, er… I saw the papers this morning. I just wanted to make sure you were… alright."

He gave her an even look, lifting a brow, and said, "Excellent."

"Yes, good," she stammered. "Just wanted to… make sure… I mean, I do know that sometimes these situations can feel difficult, so I just…" She trailed off, checking his face for any kind of reaction.

"On the contrary," he said. "It was probably one of the easiest decisions my mother has ever made."

"Good, excellent." She looked down. "I… I'm very happy for her. And you." She grinned at him and he grinned back. "I am shocked at Skeeter's gall though. It's quite private business, even if it is excellent gossip. I do feel sorry for your mother."

"Don't," he said, shrugging and looking briefly at the door frame. "She was the one to give Skeeter the heads up."

Hermione could feel her mouth opening and closing. "Oh," she finally got out. "I thought it said your mother wasn't available for comment."

"Yes," Draco said, lifting himself off the door frame. "That was my mother's one condition. That she not be available for comment." He gave her a secret grin and left her standing in her office, wondering at the chess game Narcissa had set up.

Thirty minutes later, Hermione headed to the conference room for the senior staff meeting. When she got there, she was shocked to see a new face at the table, before remembering that Cornelia Waterstone started today in the Wizengamot Relations position. She was sitting at the end of the table, in the seat that had remained empty since the beginning. When Hermione walked in, the woman turned a no-nonsense look on her, and gave the slightest grin.

"Miss Granger, yes?" Cornelia Waterstone stood and shook her hand. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Likewise, Ms. Waterstone. We're very glad to have you here at Malfoy Consulting." Hermione felt very studied, under Waterstone's eyes. "I'm looking forward to working with you on the upcoming Werewolf Policy case."

“Yes, I’ve already gathered some information on that, profiles for the Wizengamot members and their feelings regarding the werewolf community. We should discuss sooner than later.”

This woman’s face had not moved once except for her mouth. Even that was so thin and tight that it hardly moved as she spoke.

Hermione grinned at her and took her seat as the rest of the team came in behind her.

Draco welcomed Cornelia, and gave her an opportunity to introduce herself to the staff. Blaise looked very put out the whole time she spoke. After everyone had given an update on their current projects, Draco stood and cleared his throat.

“I’ve said from the beginning that I do not wish to be cagey about our finances. We’ve had a bit of a change that I want you all to be aware of.” Draco looked down at the table quickly and Hermione felt a like stone dropped in her stomach. “Our weekly income that was to last us another three weeks has been cut off early. I will be doing everything I can to renegotiate the contract between this investor, or to recruit a new investor to offset some of the strain, but you should know that Melody’s assistant Ranji and several other temporary positions have been put on hold for the next few weeks.”

Wentworth sighed. Mockridge tutted. Waterstone frowned. And Blaise narrowed his eyes at Draco.

“And what happened to that *investor*, if I may ask?” Blaise said.

“The terms of our arrangement were unsuitable.” Draco looked Blaise directly in the eye, with a stare conveying the end of the discussion.

Hermione felt her heart drumming against her ribcage. She stared at the woodgrain on the table. She knew she should have gone to the hosting class yesterday. This was a mistake. No matter what Draco said, these classes were necessary.

Whatever was going through her mind must have been displayed openly across her face, because when she looked up from the table, Blaise was watching her, one brow lifted.

She looked away and quickly refocused on Draco, who was detailing the needs for the next few weeks in light of their financial burden.

Mockridge cut in and said, “I thought you had mentioned that these weekly installments were safe. They were promised without conditions.”

Draco swallowed and met Mockridge’s eyes. “There were conditions after all.”

Mockridge tutted again. “So, what is your plan, as we approach pay day at the end of this month?”

Hermione felt her stomach twisting. She tried to tune out the contingency plans they needed to place and looked up at anything else around the room. Her eyes landed on Cornelia Waterstone, whose first day was met with this conversation. Hermione realized that

Waterstone's salary for February was a new expense to be paid. If they had known about the inheritance, Waterstone wouldn't have been hired until March.

This was out of control. She felt a pressure behind her eyes, frustrating her. She would need to talk to Draco, and continue with the classes.

When the meeting was done, and everyone's moods had spiraled downwards, Hermione stayed at the table as everyone stood and rushed back to their desks, tasked with finding ways to cut corners and possibly generate a bit more revenue over the next three weeks. She tapped her quill against the parchment, watching the blots form. Draco was still at the head of the table, pretending to gather his notes.

"Granger."

"This isn't fair. Not to those who've lost their jobs." She bit the inside of her cheek.

"They haven't been fired, Granger. Their hours have been cut."

She began stacking her notes, and stood to leave. "We can push back the Golden Snidget project. And I'll look for ways to cut corners on the Werewolf budget so we can reallocate those funds –"

"We can't reallocate those funds. The donations were given with a specific understanding of what the funds would be used for."

"So mine is the only department that isn't going through budget cuts?" She flung her arms out to the sides. "How is *that* fair."

"Yours is the only department fully funded by fundraising, not by the inheritance." He walked around the edge of the table to stand in front of her. The door was still open, but she wanted him to touch her. Like they were partners, lovers. Like they comforted each other.

She squeezed the papers in her hands.

An idea came to her. "But the *salary* for my department members is paid by the inheritance. Walter and me," she said. He narrowed his eyes at her. "You can cut my salary. Practically in half, really."

"No, Granger. We aren't cutting your salary." He almost rolled his eyes at her, stepping back to push his chair in and take his notes.

"No, truly. The amount of money I make here is obscene. For February's pay, you can cut my salary, or even take all of it," she whispered. "No one needs to know." She watched as he pressed his lips together, readying his argument. "Besides, with Pansy covering the costs of my wardrobe and without the classes burning a hole in my pocket, I'll have very few expenses."

His hands stopped moving through his paperwork. His jaw clicked. He looked up at her. "The expense for the classes was placed upon you?"

She saw the same fire in his eyes from the alley on Saturday.

“I wouldn’t let him cover it. I refused his money.” She blinked up at him. He moved his eyes across the table, thinking, planning his father’s death, probably. She touched his elbow to bring him back. “Draco, just for February. Cut my salary. The only person who will notice is Dorothea and I’m sure she won’t say anything.”

“No. That’s not how we’re going deal with this, Granger. I got us all into this mess, so let me get us out.” His jaw tightened and he looked at her before heading to the door.

As he left, she wondered how in Merlin’s name *he* was the one who got them into this mess. She looked down at her blotted parchment.

One thing was for sure. She was going to Madame Michele’s tomorrow night. Draco could deal with it.

~*~

Cornelia Waterstone ended up crashing Draco and her “lunch” date. And not in the fun way.

Cornelia had seen on the office calendar that Hermione and Draco spent some time before lunch discussing her cases on a daily basis, and had decided to join them to get caught up to speed on the Werewolf Policy.

This meant that Hermione had to go grab her notes for the Werewolf Policy, as she originally had no intention of doing anything but wrapping her legs around Draco’s hips in this “lunch” meeting.

When she returned, Draco and Cornelia were already in deep conversation about the Wizengamot members themselves, and Cornelia’s plans to connect with each of them regarding the upcoming proposal.

When Draco’s secretary (Carrie – the name was Carrie) interrupted at 12:30 to ask about Draco’s lunch order, he very politely invited Cornelia to join them, but Hermione could see the tightness in his lips, the hope that she would decline.

“Oh, thank you, sir. But I have a friend down the street that I have scheduled to get lunch with.” Cornelia left with a curt nod, and after Carrie took their order, and shut the door behind herself and Cornelia, Draco silenced the room and waved his hand to send everything on his desk flying onto the floor.

“Get on the desk.”

He was halfway out of his shirt when her brain caught up.

“Draco, we only have maybe fifteen minutes before Carrie brings back the lunch—!”

“Is that a challenge, Granger.” He raised a brow at her as he started on his belt. “Don’t think I can get you off in fifteen minutes?” His eyes were hot on hers.

She blinked at him, feeling her blood warm. He was halfway undressed already.

“Well, definitely not twice.” She raised a brow back. And smirked.

He narrowed his eyes at her. And tossed her on the desk.

~*~

Sixteen minutes later, Draco and Hermione were sitting on the couch again, eating their sandwich and salad.

He asked her a few questions about the Werewolf Policy, she assumed so that they could count this as working.

She brought up a few points for the Golden Snidget project, and offered again to stall it due to the financial situation.

“As long as it is fundraised, there’s no need to stall it.”

She nodded, then said, “I’m meeting with Viktor on Wednesday.” She swirled her lettuce around the carton. “We’re going to lunch and I’ll pitch the Golden Snidget campaign. Hopefully once he’s on board we can get Skeeter and Mr. Lovegood to cover the project.” She stabbed a tomato and brought it to her lips. “Does the magazine ‘Seeker Weekly’ do articles? Or just talk Quidditch rubbish?”

She looked over at him, and he was watching her. He smiled. “Yes, they have articles.”

“Oh, good. We can see if they’ll do one too.” She popped the tomato in her mouth and munched happily.

He finished chewing his sandwich, and said, “Good news that Krum wants to be involved.”

“Yes, he was very interested at the governor’s ball.” She aimed her fork at another tomato when she heard Draco chuckle.

“Mm-hmm. I’m sure he was,” he sang. He looked over at her with suggestive eyes.

She frowned at him. “No, not like that.”

“I’m sure just like that.” Draco raised a brow as he crumbled his sandwich wrapper. “You can’t honestly believe he’s interested in the Golden Snidgets’ welfare.”

“He is.” She felt her shoulders tense. “He is *very* interested in the Golden Snidgets, and I’ll *prove* it to you when I come back from lunch with his full support.” She stuck her nose in the air.

“Sure, Granger. Try wearing a burlap sack this time instead, and we’ll see where his true interests lie.”

She glared at him. He smirked back.

She turned back to her salad he said, “I hear you’re having dinner with my mother on Saturday.”

She glanced up at him. “Yes, that’s right.” She speared a crouton and asked, “Will you be there?”

Quick as a curse he grabbed the crouton off her fork and popped it in his mouth. She glared at him. “Possibly.” He crunched and winked at her.

She glared as she picked the last crouton and tossed it in her mouth. She was just closing the carton and placing it in the plastic bag for their trash when he spoke.

“Would you consider staying the night? After dinner?”

She looked up at him from her bent over position over their trash bag. He stared at her, pressing his lips together.

“At the Manor?” She sat up, blinking at him. He nodded. “In your room?”

“Or Mippy’s room. Wherever you feel most at home,” he deadpanned.

“Would… would your mother be alright with that? Isn’t it… improper?” She laughed tightly.

Draco shrugged. “She doesn’t have to know.” He leaned across the couch cushion to whisper in her ear. “We’d have an entire wing of the Manor to ourselves.” He kissed her ear. Then her jaw. Then her lips. “And if she catches, us I’ll just tell her to have breakfast prepared in the morning too.”

He kissed her lips lightly again. She smiled. “Alright. Yes.” She bit her lip, then added, “But do tell Mippy that I sleep on the right side of the bed.”

He bit back a grin. “I’ll make sure she accommodates you.” Before she could even begin to fathom what spending the night in Draco’s room would entail, he continued, “Also, I’ll be out of town on Friday. Personal trip.” He shifted on the couch, facing forward while she had her body turned to him.

“Oh.” That’s all she could think of to say. “Are you going back to New York?”

His eyes flipped up to hers, then away. “No.”

She nodded, like he’d said something she’d understood. She bit the inside of her cheek before mustering her bravery.

“What was in New York?”

She watched him clench his jaw. He’d come back tense, and aggressive, and non-communicative, and she, for some reason, wanted to push his buttons on this issue.

“New York was a mistake.”

She regretted ever bringing this up. She felt like whatever he was about to say, was going to be ten times worse than not knowing.

Draco stared at his hands, then finally took a breath. “There’s a woman there.” His jaw clicked.

Hermione felt like a hot spike had been shoved inside her chest. Her very active imagination began picturing Draco in all sorts of positions with a faceless American girl. Large breasts, small waist, blonde beach hair. She heard him take another deep breath beside her, readying himself to spill his secrets, and she almost stopped him, wanting to hear no more.

“She’s a Legilimens.”

Her head whipped to face him. A sexy Legilimens?

“I needed… I thought I needed her assistance.” Draco swallowed, picking at the crumbs of his sandwich.

“Assistance with what?” she whispered, afraid she would break this spell of honesty he was under.

Draco took a breath, sliding his palms over his knees, readying himself to speak.

“I’m a very skilled Occlumens. Between Aunt Bella and Severus… I had some remarkable teachers.” Draco scratched his jaw, keeping his eyes on his carpet. “I’ve been compartmentalizing for years. Separating memories, thoughts, emotions…” He paused, like he wanted to add something else to that list. Hermione couldn’t look away from his face.

She thought of him in her childhood bedroom, a deep breath in and then a blank stare. Him at his fireplace, as she screamed behind him, his mother’s hand on his own. A deep breath in and then a blank stare.

She’d known it was Occlumency, but she hadn’t known how deep it ran. He continued.

“Severus used to help me. Used to poke around until I’d regrouped. Until there were resilient walls again…”

Again, it felt like there was more. But Hermione was afraid to move. Afraid he would stop.

“But without him…” He swallowed. “Before going to New York, I had been slipping. For months. I couldn’t get the walls in place. Couldn’t separate.” He moved his hands over his knees again. “Blaise has tried to help, but he’s shit at Legilimency.” Draco chuckled, and the sound grated at her, so nervous and unnatural.

“I thought I needed someone to … test me. To poke around until it was all regrouped.” He ran a hand through his hair. “So, I got in touch with someone in New York who is one of the greatest Legilimens of our time. I offered to pay her handsomely to meet with me, and set up a portkey that night.”

Hermione was no longer afraid of a buxom blonde who had had Draco's body. Now she was considering someone who had access to his mind, his secrets, the hidden places she wished he'd share with her. The pain in her ribs choked her.

"Is that…" She cleared her throat. "Is that something she does for a living? Is there a profession in that?"

"No, no." Draco shook his head, still looking down at the carpet. "She refused my money. Refused to meet with me, really." He chuckled again. "I had to beg her. She's a normal witch. A widow."

Widow. Hermione didn't want to know much more about this woman, but she was secretly glad there wasn't some twenty-five-year-old, small-waisted, large-breasted blonde in the states who knew every one of Draco Malfoy's secrets.

"Did it help?" she asked. "Did you get what you wanted?"

She thought of the dinner with Mr. Townsend. How cold he'd been and how removed he'd been from her afterwards.

A small, sad smile ran across his lips. "No." He turned to look at her. Finally. "I kissed you again, didn't I?"

Hermione swallowed, watching him, reading him. His eyes were kind, but he was rotting her from the inside.

She tried to match him and smiled sadly back. "Actually, I kissed you."

He smirked, and it was like Draco had returned. "Yes, you went and ruined everything, didn't you." He lifted his hands from their place on his knees and brought them to her face. He leaned in to kiss her and mumbled against her lips, "Thank Merlin she didn't let me pay her. What a waste that would have been."

She smiled against his lips as he kissed her. He pressed his tongue against hers and she let him consume her slowly, but she was screaming from the inside. She needed to ask him now, before the moment vanished.

He pulled away to tilt his mouth against hers again, and she brought her hands to his, pausing.

He opened his eyes to look at her, and she saw the boy who had stared open-mouthed at her bedroom, checking every corner with his eyes before they filled with tears and he collapsed over. She heard the gasp as his aunt electrocuted her, and she heard his mother's voice – "What would Severus say" – as he caught his breath and pressed his eyelids closed. She saw the grey eyes that glared at her in the courtroom, that stared deadly at her his first visit to Cornerstone, that asked her how long she had been dating Aiden.

"Did you go to New York to forget about me?" she asked.

He looked back and forth between her eyes, and brushed his thumb across her lips.

“No,” he said. “To put you back in your box.”

Chapter End Notes

A quick question for my AO3 savvy readers: can you give me some insight into more tags I should be using for this fic? I originally didn't want to tag Pansy Parkinson, Blaise Zabini, etc to hold them as a surprise. Do you think that's right? What are your thoughts?

Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Longest chapter yet! :)

As most of you have noticed, I am focusing on writing updates rather than responding to comments. I hope to respond soon though! I appreciate your feedback and your love-notes so much.

Be sure to vote in the Enchanted Awards, through Granger Enchanted Survivors 18+ on Facebook! Lots of great, great authors nominated.

On Tuesday evening, she stepped through the fireplace to arrive in the tea room. She bit the inside of her cheek, wondering if this was the right decision, but ultimately knew that if she could secure the next three installments of the inheritance, then it would all go away.

She took a seat at one of the nearby tables and waited until 7:59PM when the door to Madame Michele's office opened.

The small woman examined her through her glasses. Hermione stood.

"Mz Granger. I waz told you would not be taking anymore classes."

Hermione swallowed. "There was a misunderstanding, I'm afraid. I intend to finish these classes, and continue the deal I had with Lucius Malfoy. I would appreciate if you would relay that to him."

Madame Michele raised a wiry brow at her. "Very well, Mz Granger. I will do my best."

~*~

Hermione had owled Monsieur DuBois on Monday to reschedule the interior design class Draco had crashed, and Madame Bernard, whose hosting class Hermione had postponed on Sunday morning.

Madame Bernard had agreed to meet at 9PM on Tuesday directly after Madame Michele, and Monsieur DuBois had said only Wednesday at 7AM would work for him.

She had a feeling that they all planned this.

She arrived to work on Wednesday morning at five past eight, yawning. Draco was there when the lift opened, and he raised a brow at her as he handed her a cup of coffee.

“Rough night?”

“Yes.” She didn’t bother coming up with any kind of excuse. She sipped the coffee as they walked to her office, like every morning. As she pulled the cup away from her lips, she saw Kelsey, Mockridge’s Associate, look at the two of them and smile down at her desk.

Hermione blinked. Were they too obvious?

“I’ve decided on a plan for lunch,” Draco said, and Hermione focused on him. “Something to get our privacy back,” he whispered to her.

Cornelia Waterstone had crashed lunch yesterday as well. And yesterday, Waterstone had accepted when Draco offered for her to have lunch with them. They hadn’t had sex since Monday, or even touched each other. Which was suddenly very apparent to Hermione as Draco guided her to her own doorway, hand low on her back.

Draco continued, “I’ve booked a meeting on the Muggle-born Integration Program for this afternoon. We won’t be needing any Wizengamot council on that.” He raised a brow at her. “And, I guess, we could actually talk about it.” He winked at her, and because his back was to the office floor, she was the only one to see.

She killed the smile on her lips. “I have the lunch meeting with Viktor today, remember?”

She watched the dream die on his face. “Ah, yes. Viktor.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Maybe tomorrow?”

“I have a meeting tomorrow at lunch. And then I’m out of town on Friday.” He frowned at her. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

She blinked at him. Tomorrow night? As in… a real date? And not just hanky-panky during the lunch hour?

“Er… I guess so.” Dance class! “I mean, er, no. I’m not, actually.” She looked away from him. “But I am free tonight.” She looked back at him. She had no idea what it was he had planned, but she if he wanted to see her in any official capacity, she would do it.

He pouted. “Tonight is no good for me.” He glared at the door frame. “I’ll figure something out.” He looked back at her, and touched her hip lightly before he walked away. She was sure no one could see, but she still melted a bit.

A few hours later she was headed out to her lunch with Viktor. They met at the same café she and Katya had gone to, and Hermione wondered if it was a Bulgarian thing.

He was already waiting for her, and he stood from the table when she entered.

“Hermyowne,” he said, and she thought that was pretty darn close. He pulled her to him and kissed her on each cheek, brushing close to her lips.

They sat and chatted and laughed, and she found the perfect timing to bring up the Golden Snidget campaign. Luckily for her, having Viktor’s support on this cost both Viktor and M.C.G. very little. He would need to be interviewed for *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet* during their media campaign next week, and as they got closer to the court date, he would need to do a few ads against Golden Snidget hunting.

Viktor was very open to discussing it. He was attentive to everything she had to say, even if he did interrupt her every few minutes to tell her how beautiful she looked, or how her skin glowed when she was fired up about Snidget rights.

She tried to push down what Draco had said about Viktor only being interested in her and not the Snidgets.

At the end of the lunch, she offered to show him the new M.C.G. offices, and let him meet some of her coworkers, including Walter, who had tried his hardest to suppress his Viktor Krum fanaticism that morning.

Viktor walked with her across the street, and they took the service elevator up. Melody’s eyes grew wide and greedy, and several girls in the cubicles did a double-take on Viktor Krum. Walter appeared out of nowhere and began shaking Viktor’s hand, discussing some Quidditch-related thing. Hermione smiled politely as Wentworth poked his head out of his office and the three of them started in on some old World Cup story.

She stood at the front, watching as Melody tried to keep her eyes off of Viktor a few feet away, and sorted her mail.

Blaise almost knocked her over in the rush to get to Viktor Krum. As she righted herself, Draco appeared on her shoulder.

“How was your date?”

She ignored the phrasing and said, “Excellent. He’ll be joining us next week for the media coverage. And he’s very interested in the project, thank you very much.” She lowered her voice and continued, “I didn’t have to show him my tits or anything.”

She felt Draco still next to her, and she smiled up at him innocently.

“Great news, Granger.”

Viktor was making his way back to Hermione.

“Hermah-nee, I must be going.” Viktor looked up at Draco and gave him a tight smile. “Hello, Malfoy.”

“Krum,” Draco said, extending his hand to shake. “We’re so glad to have your support.”

“Yes,” Viktor said, pulling his hand away from Draco. “Anything for Harmany.” Despite the mispronunciation, Viktor managed to very confidently take Hermione’s hand and give her knuckles a kiss.

She smiled at him and offered to take him downstairs. She walked him out, past the deliveries door, and onto the street.

She promised to follow up with more details about the media day next week, and he let her know with deep eyes that she could contact him for anything she needed.

Hermione blushed and went to hug him. Viktor kissed her left cheek, then her right, and just as Hermione was pulling away to say farewell, he kissed her lips, soft and insistent.

She blinked at him as he pulled back. He gave her a dashing smile and walked away.

Hermione wandered back inside, stood with buzzing lips in the lifts, and when the doors opened and Draco was still there, pretending to sort mail, she tried to pass him.

“I don’t like your Bulgarian,” he said.

She looked up and Melody was preoccupied with something. No one could hear him. He looked up at her, checking her reaction. She steeled her eyes on him.

“I had to put up with yours. I lived,” she said.

She raised a brow at him, and flounced away, into her office and out of sight.

~*~

The picture of Viktor kissing her on the lips was in Skeeter’s society section on Thursday. Someone had followed them from the café, getting shots of them sitting together over croissants.

Ginny was very confused, but Hermione reassured her that it was nothing. Just a European thing.

Ginny pointed at the picture just as Viktor pressed his lips against hers, more than a peck, and said, “Yes, looks positively ‘French’ to me.”

Hermione frowned at her and headed out the door.

When the lift doors opened, and Draco was not there with coffee, Hermione realized how many people read Skeeter’s society section. She headed to her office, ignoring the stare from

Kelsey, the intuitive associate, and closed her door behind her.

"'Old Flames Burn Brighter.'" A voice from her desk, and she looked over to see the *Daily Prophet* hovering in front of Draco's face as he read the title of the Skeeter section. He folded the paper over itself, and eyed her over the top. She noticed a cup of coffee placed on her desk next to her ink.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Malfoy?" She gave him a smarmy grin, as she hung up her coat and scarf on the coatrack.

She looked back at him and he was still leaning on the edge of her desk, reading the paper. He was smirking down at the words, but his eyes weren't moving and his lips were tight.

She walked over to him slowly, pulled down the paper from his face, and leaned up to kiss him. She pressed her lips over his, and he relaxed, bringing one arm to wrap around her waist. She moved her lips across his, lightly, coaxing him until he kissed her back firmly. He brought his hand to her cheek, dipping his tongue into her mouth.

She pulled back, and smiled against his lips. "I like our flame better."

He looked over her shoulder, trying to fight his smile. "I have a meeting in five minutes, or else I'd offer to pound you into this desk."

"Hmm." She blushed. "That's a shame." She reached around him, pressing against him on purpose, and grabbed her coffee cup. She smirked at him as she sipped.

"This week's installment of the inheritance transferred yesterday," he said, and she let the smile melt off her face. "It's usually on Tuesday evenings, but it was yesterday, at 8AM." He searched her face. "You don't know anything about that, though, do you Granger?"

She swallowed her coffee, and shook her head. "Maybe your father wants to give it to you after all?"

"Maybe," he hummed, searching her eyes. He moved her hair over her ear, and then kissed her on the cheek, then moved to the other cheek, and she was smiling before he could finish the same path Viktor had displayed in the papers. He kissed her lips.

He slid out from between her and the desk, and gave her a flirty grin as he left. She wandered to the door when she heard him greet someone at the elevators.

She leaned against her doorframe, and found Draco shaking hands with the same man from the governor's ball – the one Slughorn had introduced him to. She watched as Draco led him back to his office, and shut the door behind them.

~*~

Saturday couldn't come soon enough. Hermione wrapped up the books she'd previously borrowed and placed them next to her bag.

She checked her hair, dress, and makeup in the mirror again. It was very difficult to find something that was appropriate to wear to dinner with Narcissa Malfoy, and yet flirty enough to drive her whatever-he-was wild with desire. She'd settled for a Narcissa Malfoy approved dress, with some recently purchased Draco Malfoy approved undergarments.

She hadn't seen Draco since Thursday morning. He'd been swamped at work and then out of town on Friday. So that was now a total of five days since they'd had sex.

To put it mildly, she was *ready* to spend time with Draco tonight.

She took one last look in the mirror and stepped through her Floo to the Malfoy fireplace, into the entrance hall. At the base of the marble staircase, Narcissa Malfoy stood in long robes with her hands folded. Hermione took a moment to smile at her, feeling like she'd come home after a very long trip.

Before she could even get out a greeting, Mippy appeared in front of her.

"Miss! Mippy is happy to see you! Mippy has made an excellent soup for tonight, but Mippy could not find pumpkins! They're not in season! Mippy wanted to give you pumpkin soup!"

The elf's bright, round eyes shone up at her. Hermione smiled and said, "Thank you, Mippy. I'm sure whatever you've made is wonderful.

Mippy beamed. Narcissa coughed behind her, and Mippy nodded at her and moved to the side. Narcissa was there with a welcoming hug.

"Hermione, dear. I'm so happy to have you here."

She felt arms around her shoulders holding her close. She didn't realize that she missed Narcissa's smell.

"Thank you, Narcissa. I'm so happy to be here."

The older woman pulled back to smile at her, and said, "Let's get you set up in the library for a bit, should we?"

Mippy took the old books in Hermione's hands and popped away with them, as Hermione turned to follow Narcissa down the hallway, passing the busts. She kept her eyes off Lucius's stone face peering at her, and focused on where Draco's bust would one day stand, just to the side of the library doors.

Narcissa opened the library doors. It smelled just like she remembered it.

"Shall we sit for a bit?" Narcissa asked. "I don't want to take up too much of your browsing time."

"No, not at all. I would love to catch up."

Mippy, as if she had been waiting for those magic words, appeared holding a tray.

“Coffee, dear,” Narcissa asked. “Or we have decaf as well?”

Though it was a bit late in the evening for caffeine, Hermione thought of the small amount of sleep she planned to get this evening, and hid her blush as she asked for caffeine.

Mippy poured, and she and Narcissa sat. So many things had changed and shifted since their first date in the library. Hermione wondered what Narcissa’s grand scheme had been then.

They talked books. They talked Malfoy Consulting. They talked charity balls and the Chimaera that now resided in Gringotts and small anecdotes of Draco as a child. Every time Hermione brought her saucer below her cup, she caught Narcissa staring, lips pursed, and Hermione wondered if there were things she needed to un-learn.

Narcissa kept finding delicate ways to bring the conversation around to Draco – her biggest talent. Hermione was desperate to know if she knew about the two of them, but she was also sure that Narcissa’s powers of perception were more impressive than she could have imagined.

“Narcissa,” Hermione began, “I know this probably goes without saying, but I was sorry to hear about the divorce proceedings.” Hermione looked down at her coffee. “Draco assured me that this was a good thing, but still, I wanted to express my sympathy for what you’re going through.”

She looked up, checking in with Narcissa and found a delicate smile on her lips.

“That’s very kind of you, but yes, Draco is right. Everything is just as it should be.” Narcissa replaced her cup on her saucer, and set it on the side table. “Lucius broke a deal with me. So I, in turn, am cashing in my chips.” Narcissa turned back to her. “It’s nothing Lucius didn’t see coming.”

Hermione nodded at her coffee cup, trying to understand the complexities of the Malfoy family drama.

“Well, dear,” Narcissa said, “you have about an hour before dinner is served. Let me leave you to browse.” Narcissa stood and Hermione followed suit. Narcissa pointed a finger at her. “And don’t let me catch you leaving here with less than ten new books!”

Hermione laughed and thanked her. Narcissa produced the same basket that Draco had brought for her the last time she’d looked for books, and said, “Draco should be home in time for dinner.”

She left her, standing in the middle of the library. Hermione smiled at the books, determined to discover something new today while she wandered. She forced herself to pass the instructional texts and old spellbooks, moving deeper into the stacks. She hadn’t seen the back wall of the library before, so she started to feel a bit overwhelmed at the sheer size of the room.

Hermione had a passing, innocent thought that she would give anything to have free reign of the Malfoy library, to have amassed this collection, to be able to add to it, to be able to read

every book in it.

And just as she found the back wall, complete with a window seat overlooking the gardens, Hermione realized that Draco Malfoy's wife would. Lady Malfoy would get not only control of the library and its contents and care, but the whole house. The renovations, the design, the gardens.

The interior design lessons with Monseiur DuBois. The hosting classes with Madame Bernard.

Hermione swallowed, searching out the window, and finding the gazebo.

She shook her head, turning away and focusing on the stacks. Focusing on the books. Solid and uncomplicated.

She took her time, examining the shelves, looking through old texts for hidden secrets. She placed a few that she wanted to take with her on the window seat, but again, she needed to consolidate. Her fingers had just ghosted over a book on Nicolas Flamel, one that she was almost positive would have aided the three of them in their first year, when she felt the air shift in her corner.

She looked over her shoulder, and Draco was there, leaning casually. Watching her. He smirked.

Her blood warmed in her veins as she grinned back at him. "Didn't your mother ever teach you it isn't polite to stare?" She raised a brow at him.

"She tried." He crossed his arms. "But she also told me to enjoy the beautiful things in life, so I find it a very difficult contradiction."

She blinked at him, and felt herself blush. She looked back down to the Nicolas Flamel book, flipping open the cover.

"Interesting finds?"

"Mm-hmm. In fact, I'm almost positive that if I'd had access to the Malfoy library over the past ten years, Voldemort wouldn't have had a chance." She grinned down at the table of contents.

She heard him stand tall, and move closer to her. "Well, the next time a dark wizard comes along, I'll make sure you have everything you need."

Hermione gave a small smile, her mind wandering to her earlier thoughts about who might have access to this library in the future.

"What are you reading now?" She felt his voice over her shoulder, felt the heat of his chest behind her as she stood facing the stacks.

"Nicolas Flamel. Alchemist. Philosopher's stone." One of his hands moved her hair off of her neck. "This book was written in the 1800s, before much was known about him." His left

hand rested on her hip, over the light dress she'd worn. "So – so it mainly has conspiracy theories and possible sightings."

She felt his face near her own, his cheek brushing her ear. He looked over her shoulder at the book and hummed, "Mm-hmm." The sound sent shivers through her, and she knew he noticed.

"Probably not all that factual," she said, and the hand on her hip started rubbing small circles, his thumb just below her ribs, his fingers splayed across her hipbone. "But – but that's always a very interesting place to start… with research." She was regretting now how thin her dress was. She could feel the heat of his hand on her like there was no fabric at all. "Starting with the things that had been disqualified or proven wrong."

He hummed in her ear again, and her fingers squeezed on the book. She pressed her lips together, as he lowered his head to her neck, brushing his lips across her skin. She leaned back against his chest, and his right hand ran down her arm, leaving goosebumps along the way. She closed her eyes, thinking that the last time they'd truly been together was when he'd thrown her across his desk, her fingers squeezing the stone as he pounded his hips against her own, sucking on her skin.

His right hand finally reached her hand, holding the book. "Why don't you read me the Preface?" He flipped the page for her. She swallowed.

She took a deep breath, and tried to focus her glazing eyes on the pages in front of her.

"'Not much is known of Nicolas Flamel. I have tracked him over my fifty-four years, and I have made discoveries that I wish for the modern world to know of.'"

Hermione paused when Draco's hand left the book and joined his other on her waist, both now rubbing circles against her dress.

"Go on," he whispered. And his lips dropped to her neck again.

"'I have been to France, at the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. I have—'" His kisses were so light on her skin, that she almost wished for him to press harder. "'I have spoken with the remaining portraits who may know of Flamel and his wife Perenelle. They have told me many tales of young Nicolas…'"

Hermione's eyes closed for a moment. Draco's hand moved up the left side of her ribs, counting them as he travelled. His hand stopped before reaching her breast, letting each finger fit between a rib, and his thumb round the swell of her. She waited for him to touch her, eyelids fluttering, with his right hand still drawing circles on her hip and his lips painting patterns on her shoulder.

"What did the portraits have to say, Granger?" he mumbled against her skin, and a shock pulled through her stomach, squeezing her thighs together, and pulling at the skin on her chest until she knew her nipples were poking through the fabric.

She whimpered. “Um…” She opened her eyes, blinking to clear them. “’…tales of young Nicolas and his adventures at school. But some of them had seen him since. Some of them…’” She focused on the book as Draco’s thumb started whispering across her breast, inching closer. His fingers lifted, cupping her, and his right hand slid down, down, gathering the fabric of her dress to get underneath. “’Some of them had seen Nicolas Flamel and his w-wife as recently as 1798, putting the Fl-flamels at around four-hundred-years-old.’”

Draco brought his right hand under the dress, and she felt the fabric flutter back down, ghosting across her knees as his fingers danced across her thighs. She knew she’d already made a mess of her new knickers. The knickers that Draco would see her in tonight, and she smiled, biting her lip as he brushed his hand against her. He bit down on her neck and she moaned. His left hand finally gave her what she wanted, moving over her breast, and then plucking at her, pulling and teasing through her dress, through her bra.

“Four-hundred-years-old is very old, isn’t it, Granger?”

“Mm-hmm.” She gasped. “Yes.” She hissed.

The hand touching her over her knickers, moved up to her belly, and dipped under the elastic, running over and down, slipping through her.

She leaned into him, almost dropping the book.

“What else does it say,” he whispered, then kissing against her jaw, sucking on her.

“I – I can’t, Draco. Please.”

He slipped a finger inside of her, slowly pushing in, and she gasped. He pushed his hips against her firmly, holding her up between his hips and the hand inside her knickers, and she felt him hard against her backside. The hand at her chest ran across to her other breast, trying to fight the fabric of her dress to let him under and inside. He pushed his hips against her again, and he flicked his thumb over her bud.

“Oh, god. Draco.”

He added another finger inside of her and she could feel him huffing against her jaw, kissing her forgotten as he pushed in and out, pumping a slow rhythm while he moved his thumb against her quickly, his hips starting to grind.

She dropped the book. She ran her hands over his arms, trying to find something to hold onto.

“Put your hands on the shelves.” His voice was gruff against her jaw. And her hands shot forward, leaning slightly, changing the angle of her hips that made the both of them moan. She felt him moving his hips quickly, faster as he rubbed at her, faster as she clenched around his fingers as they thrusted into her.

“Fuck,” he hissed against her, straining. “I’ve wanted this…” He gasped against her ear. “Wanted this every time I saw you in the Hogwarts library.”

She groaned, started to squeeze him. “Please, Draco.”

The hand in her bra snapped down to her hips, holding her still as he rutted against her, the fingers inside of her slowed, but his thumb kept moving on her. She began to ride his hand, hearing him gasp as she moved against him.

A *crack* from behind them. A squeaky voice.

“Mippy is telling you that dinner is ready.”

Hermione’s hand slapped over her mouth, as Draco stilled behind her, one hand still inside her knickers. Her eyes were wide as Draco carefully slipped his fingers from her, moving his hand to her thigh.

He cleared his throat.

“Thank you, Mippy. We’ll be there shortly.”

A *crack*.

They were still.

Hermione laughed. She felt his forehead drop onto her neck and a curse whisper against her back. That made her laugh harder.

~*~

Dinner was lovely. In comparison to the first time she’d had dinner with Narcissa and Draco, it was a walk in the park.

When she said her goodbyes to Narcissa, thanking her and promising to see each other more often, Draco was already standing, waiting to “escort her out.”

He walked her down the hall, passing the library, and out into the entrance hall. He turned at the bottom of the stairs and started to climb. He took her hand in his, and lead her up. Once on the third floor, they twisted through a few hallways, passing tapestries and statues. Hermione was ashamed to realize that Monsieur DuBois would be quite proud of her as she recognized many famous paintings and styles.

The moonlight shone in through a window they were approaching. Draco’s fingers were warm on her skin. The window overlooked a small pond, and the white peacocks could just be seen in the dusk light. She stopped dead, looking out the large window, and Draco’s hand was pulled from hers.

“Wow,” she murmured.

She came to the window practically pressing her nose against it. She turned back to look at Draco and he was watching her. She smiled and let him lead her down the hall.

They passed a few doors, and stopped in front of an ornate wooden one. There was a dragon carved into the surface.

He looked at her, then took a steady breath and opened the door, pushing it aside so she could enter before him. She stepped inside.

It looked exactly how one would expect Draco Malfoy's bedroom to look. Canopy bed. Green curtains. Book shelves and armchairs. Fireplace. Plush carpeting. Doors leading out to a balcony.

Hermione giggled.

"What?"

She looked up at him, smiling, and saw he was watching her closely.

"It's just all very predictable. I love it." She laughed. He rolled his eyes and closed the door behind them.

She strolled around the room, twice the size of her bedroom at home, possibly the size of her entire apartment with Ginny, if you count the closet, ensuite bathroom, and balcony.

She went to the bookshelf, documenting the titles that Draco liked to have close to him. She let her fingers trail across the shelves.

She poked her head into the bathroom, finding a huge marble tub. She touched the curtains, let her eyes pass over a picture of Draco with Crabbe and Goyle, taken about fourth year.

He followed her as she explored, giving her a few feet of space, and she could feel his eyes on her.

She approached the closet door, and turned to ask permission. He nodded. She opened the walk-in closet and found mostly black and grey. She laughed again. She wandered in, and felt him come to lean in the doorway. She ran her hands over his clothes.

"We need to get you into some oranges and pinks." She winked at him.

His lips twitched, but he was still watching her. Nervous almost.

There was a set of drawers in the corner, and she almost asked permission to shuffle through them. She let her fingers run over the wood, and Draco shifted in the doorway. She turned to him and found that tense expression on his face again.

Hermione moved to him, wound her hands up his chest and into his hair, and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her waist, squeezing her to him. She parted his lips and tasted the wine from dinner on him, smiling against his mouth as he let his hands wander down and grab her backside. He pulled her close to him and sighed into her mouth.

"I like your bedroom, Draco."

His eyes fluttered open, dark and heady. He smiled down at her and kissed her again. She pulled back and looked down at his chest, shy suddenly.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh, really.” His voice teased her.

“Yes, I think… I think you’ll like it.”

“When do I get my surprise.” His hands were still cupping her backside, and he squeezed, then massaged, rubbing figures into her flesh. She felt a hot pulse of pleasure move through her, and she thought of how ready she had been to have him inside of her when they were in the library earlier.

“You’ll need to, um… give me some space,” she stuttered. He smiled down at her, and exited the closet, moving to sit on the edge of his bed. He smirked at her, and she felt a shiver go through her.

She stood in front of him, and reached back for the zipper on her dress. She got it down, and looked up at him as she pulled off one shoulder, then the other. When the fabric pulled past her bra, his eyes flashed at her.

It was a deep green color, with black lace on the edges. It was very thin, so thin that she knew he could see her nipples through it.

She pushed the dress down her waist, and let it slide down her hips, where she revealed green knickers to match.

He swallowed.

She stepped out of the dress, and stood there in only her bra, knickers, and heels. She pressed her lips closed, trying not to cover herself.

“Get on the bed.”

She looked up at him and he was standing, moving to the side of the bed so she could get on it. His eyes were running over her body, up to her face, and then back down.

She smiled. Hermione moved to the bed, feeling the cool air against her skin, and feeling his eyes on her. She heard the smallest intake of air when she passed him, and he saw for the first time that her knickers were thong style. She saw his hand reach up and grasp the post of his bed.

She bit her lip, and decided to tease him. If she could.

She leaned down, bringing one knee to the bottom of the bed, and began to crawl to the center. She knew her barely covered ass was on display for him, and she tried to push her hips out even higher. She could hear him breathing.

She reached the center of his giant bed, and twisted her head to look at him.

“Like this?”

His eyes were on her backside. He swallowed and looked up at her face with hot eyes. “Lay down.”

She smiled and twisted around so she was laying with her head on his pillows. She stared up at his canopy bed, and grinned. She brought her knees together demurely, as he moved to the foot of the bed, and kicked off his shoes. He pulled his sweater over his head and tossed it somewhere, and began to crawl up the bed, like she had. She raised up on her elbows to watch him.

When his head reached her knees, he kissed each of them, over and over until they parted against her will. She could feel her breathing coming quicker now, and as his eyes watched her face, he kissed a path up her thigh, toward her pretty green underwear.

She bit her lip. He’d only put his mouth there the once, in his office, when she’d rambled about the giant squid to him. It was good. Very good. But he had distracted her then, and she knew she was already wet, and his eyes were devouring her green underwear as his lips got closer and closer.

She was about to maybe grab his head, pull him away from… down there, when he planted his mouth right on her, over her fancy green knickers.

She gasped, and found his sheets in her fists, her head landed on his pillows, and her knees tried to close, tried to keep him out, but he pushed her open with his hand on her thigh.

He kissed her over the fabric twice, once close to her entrance, and again just on top of her clit, and she growled something. She felt his tongue, swiping from bottom to top, over the fabric, pressing firm at the top, and the fabric and his tongue and the pressure –

“Fuck… Draco.”

He lifted his head. She looked down at him and his eyes were glazed over and hot. His mouth was open and panting over her, she could feel the air hit her every time he breathed.

“Say it again.”

She looked down at him, panting, and felt the words hit her panties.

“Draco…”

He shook his head at her, smirking. She felt the muscles inside of her flutter around nothing. She wanted him inside, something to clench down on. He still held her open, his hand on her thigh, starting to squeeze her.

“Fuck,” she tried.

Draco smiled at her, and lowered his head, kissing her again. She moaned.

“Oh, fuck.”

He laughed against her, and the sound and the air hit her right where she wanted him. He moved the hand off her thigh, and pulled her knickers to the side. Her eyes widened when she realized he wouldn't just take them off of her. He dipped his head, eyes watching her eyes, and let his tongue swirl down on her. He slipped inside, licking and pushing, then out again.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," she gasped.

He groaned, with his tongue inside of her, and she grabbed his hair, pushing him down, forcing him closer. He lowered down on the bed on his elbow, and wrapped his arm under her thigh, opening her more, pushing her leg higher, her knee up and open.

She raised her hips. It was a sudden movement. And it brought him further inside. He moved his tongue faster against her. Quick lapping motions against her entrance. She raised her hips again.

"Oh, fuck, Draco."

Draco dragged his lips to her clit, moving the fabric aside with his hand, and moved quickly against her. She bucked against him again, pushing his face into her with her hands at the back of his head.

This was heaven. This was bliss. To feel him devouring her, not being able to breath and not caring.

Not being able to breath.

She released his head, moving her hands to the sheets again, and moaned. He came up for air quickly, sucking it in. He looked up at her.

"Let me know when you're close."

She watched as he pressed into her again, his tongue dancing across her. She didn't know how she would know when she was close. It happened so suddenly sometimes.

She brought her hands up to her breasts as he lapped at her. She moaned as she played with herself through the thin bra. She imagined his hands, tweaking and pulling.

She felt her muscles move inside of her. She wanted to close her legs on something. He had her wide open, and she wanted to clench down and ride something.

He groaned against her again and the sound sent waves through her. She grabbed at her breasts, pulling and pulling and another fluttering in her abdomen.

"I think… I think I'm … Draco."

He looked up at her, and his eyes landed on her hands on her breasts. He made a sound against her again, and it moved through her.

"Fuck," she whispered.

The hand holding her knickers open, quickly moved to her entrance. He kept his eyes on her as he flicked her with his tongue, quicker and quicker, and she started to pull in different directions.

Two of his fingers finally entered her, pushing all the way in, and she clenched around them, and started to whine. He held them there, not moving, just pushed up inside, and sucked hard on her clit.

She felt her muscles clamp down, pleased to have something to hold onto. And she screamed as she flew over the edge.

On the way down, she could feel his fingers, pumping slowly, lazy. And his tongue working small listless circles. She opened her eyes and found him watching her, tongue on her.

“Fuck,” she said again.

He laughed against her. He raised up onto his hands and crawled up her body, kissing her stomach along the way. He dropped light kisses onto each of her breasts through the sheer bra, and she smiled and bit her lip.

She could feel him hard against her hip as he hovered over her mouth and asked, “Can I kiss you like this?”

She blinked at him, not knowing what he meant, and then realized where his mouth had just been, and how her orgasm was still all over his lips.

“Um,” she stuttered. “I guess so.”

He smiled at her and shook his head. He grabbed a tissue from his side table and wiped his mouth. He kissed her jaw, her neck.

She was so happy. And almost sleepy. But he pressed against her stomach, firmly, grinding.

Should she… Should she return the favor?

She’d never… done that before.

She was suddenly wide awake.

Maybe he would talk her through it?

She reached down for his pants and started to unbuckle him. He sighed against her neck.

He pulled back and helped her, sitting back on his knees, and staring down at her, licking his lips.

Well, that didn’t take long. She was hot again.

She pushed at his shoulders until he was on his back. He laughed at her, and she crawled on top of him. Her hair was around her shoulders and she pressed her lips against his, forgetting

that he tasted like her. She gasped as he pushed into her mouth.

She pulled back and kissed down his chest. One of his hands came to her head, moving through her hair. She looked up at him and his eyes were dark. She kissed one of his nipples and his lips quirked at her.

Alright, not so sensitive there.

She dipped her head, continuing down, and he gasped when he figured out her intentions. She looked up and his eyes were wide and watching her. She kissed him again, lower, and his jaw opened. She watched as his breath came out heavier the lower she got.

She started pulling at his trousers and he sat up, grabbing her arms.

“You don’t have to.”

She sat up and looked at him. “You don’t want me to?”

His mouth opened. And closed. And he didn’t say anything. She looked down at his waist again, and saw how ready he was. She kissed his stomach, and Draco laid back.

“Oh, Merlin,” he whispered.

She pulled his trousers over his hips, and swallowed as she stared at the front of his boxers. She didn’t know what to do. She saw his stomach muscles clench, and she looked up at his face, eyes on her.

“We don’t – “ He reached for her, sitting up again. “There’s so many things I want to do tonight. Every night. We can try that later.”

His hands slid down her arms, and he kissed her, pressing his tongue inside and she tasted herself.

“Can we do something else instead?” he asked.

She tried not to feel ashamed, and inexperienced. So, she just nodded.

He moved her off of him, and took off his trousers completely, followed by his boxers. She was so glad they didn’t go with plan A, as she truly got a look at him.

He pulled her knickers down to her knees and she finished taking them off along with her heels. She reached for her bra, and he stopped her. “No, I never want you to take that off.” He smiled against her lips and she smiled back. He pressed over her, him completely naked now and her still in her bra.

He opened her knees wide, pressing against her, and kissed her on the mouth again. Once she pulled her knees up, pressing alongside of him, he turned them, flipping onto his back. Her hair fell around them as she pulled up.

“Can we try like this?” he asked, looking up from the pillows.

Plan A might have been easier. She didn't know how to… move like he did.

"I… don't know how to…"

He smiled up at her and licked his lips. "Let's figure it out."

He brought his hands up to her hips, and pulled her gently down on top of him, sliding against her. She pressed her lips together, her bottom half still very wet from earlier.

She brought her hands to his chest, pressing against him as she raised up, and let him guide himself into her. He slipped in easily, and she tried to relax, closing her eyes, and lowered down onto his hips. She thought he was all the way inside, but he was still stretching into her. Her muscles clenched on him, trying to accommodate him, and he moaned.

She opened her eyes and found his squeezed closed, breath coming quickly.

She didn't know what to do next. She tried reversing the motion, and lifted up again, letting him slide almost all the way out of her and then coming back down again. His eyes snapped open to watch her.

She pushed her hair out of the way, over her shoulder, and he must have liked that because his hands squeezed her hips.

She raised up again, trying to go faster, but knowing that this pace was going to be difficult. She could feel her thighs shaking already.

She was just about to ask him to take over. She looked up at his face and found him panting, devouring her with his eyes, licking his lips, and squeezing his fingers on her hips.

She tried a few more strokes. He reached up and pulled at her breast. She gasped, and found one more stroke in her. She leaned her arms on his chest again, putting her weight on him, and the angle changed. She caught her breath as both his hands came up to her chest. Squeezing and lifting and tugging at her through the bra. Her hips bucked against him, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

She tried it again, and he groaned.

Well, this she could do. And it was starting to feel okay for her too. She slammed her hips forward. Short, sharp movements, and he panted, grabbing at her ribs.

She came down again, placing her hands beside his head. Her hair fell over her shoulder again and she left it there as his eyes darkened. She thrust her hips in this angle and she could feel the base of him on her sensitive bud. She did it again, and bucked again. And she picked up the pace.

"Yes," he hissed.

She looked up at his face and it was tight, and eyes pressed closed. She rode him again, forward, and forward, and down, down, down. And his hips rose up to meet hers. He groaned.

“Granger, yes. Oh, fuck yes.” He moved one hand to her hip, pulling her forward as his hips snapped up, and his other hand moved between their bodies, and the extra pressure made her gasp.

She watched his face, hovering over him, as he started to take over the pace. She didn’t care. His hips rose to meet her as his hand pulled her down on him. She spread her knees wider, and it brought her closer, opening more, and she held her breath as he started moving his fingers fast on her. Over and over and she didn’t know she was able to come again. She thought this was for him. But she felt herself getting lighter and lighter. She kissed him, and he growled into her mouth, her hair tangling between their lips.

Her hips were barely moving now, just rutting quickly, pushing against his hand that was on her clit. She was clenching against him, and he was panting in her mouth. She pulled up, raising back up, tall on his hips. She felt like she could do this now.

She moved her hips quickly from here, forward, forward, forward. His eyes watched her, and his hips found a rhythm again. Up against her, up, up, up.

She brought her hands to her breasts again. He groaned deep in his throat and he started pounding upwards, quicker. She watched him, his eyes rolling in his head and his lip between his teeth. He was sweating hard, and she knew her chest was damp too.

She tried to move up and down again instead of forward. She bounced on him twice before he let out an “oh, yes.”

She clenched her thighs, trying to keep a rhythm of up and down and up and down. His fingers started moving on her clit again. She gasped and bounced two more times before she started clenching around him, her muscles fluttering and grabbing him, she couldn’t bounce anymore. Couldn’t do anything.

She was falling. Her back hit the mattress and she realized he had flipped them. She was still clenching him, moaning and screaming and grabbing his shoulders, and pushing her nails into his back, but he started pounding her into the mattress. His hips moved aggressively but she didn’t care. He was groaning in her ears. He was panting, and cursing and she was still clenching inside and she didn’t know when it would stop. She ran her hands into his hair and he bit down on her neck as he stuttered, rhythm failing. He yelled something against her skin and snapped his hips four more times before pressing forward and holding himself against her, straining. She found another ledge to fall over.

She screamed and felt her inside muscles massaging him, pulling him closer and closer. She felt the stars behind her eyelids and felt his skin breaking under her nails.

She panted against him. He was heavy on her and she couldn’t catch her breath.

“I can’t… oh, my god. I can’t breathe.”

He lifted up, and looked into her eyes. He stayed inside of her as she caught her breath. Every few seconds her muscles would hold him again. And she had no idea what it felt like for him but for her it was like never ending agony. Perfect agony.

He finally pulled out of her, and she felt another wave hit her without him inside.

“Ugh, no. Please come back.” She grabbed at his shoulders. He laughed. She bit her lip, still trying to figure out if she was still in the middle of an orgasm.

He pressed his head against her chest. He kissed each of her breasts over and over, alternating kisses. She just watched him, waiting for another wave that never came.

“You’re the most perfect thing in the world,” he whispered against her breast. She felt the air pass the fabric and if he asked her, she would go again. Right now.

He turned over to lay on his back, and dragged her body with him. She laid her head on his chest, and was struck by how much better a sleepover was than an office tryst or a chaise lounge in a governor’s ball. She got to lay here. With him.

And he had invited her to stay the night, so there was no need for any awkward gathering of clothes and “see you next time.”

He pulled the duvet up around them. She sat up and took off the bra, tossing it in a random direction. As she laid back down, his eyes were taking in her bare chest. She pressed against his side, laying on one hip, draping her leg across his.

“I’m coming back. For the bed,” she announced. She smiled and closed her eyes.

His chest rumbled. “Just the bed?”

“And your mother, of course. The bed. And your mother.”

“And the library.”

“And the library. The bed, your mother, and the library.”

He ran a hand up and down her arm lightly.

“My mother was very glad to have you over,” he said.

She smiled against his chest. “I’m very glad to be friends with her again. I missed her.”

Draco sighed. “That was my fault, I’m afraid.” She lifted her head and looked up at him. He stared at the ceiling. “I told her to stay away from you. After your visit to Azkaban. After she miscalculated her control over my father.” He swallowed. “I’m sorry. I told her not to contact you again.”

She blinked at his face. “Oh.” She thought of Narcissa and her last conversation before the estrangement. The way she’d frosted at her when Hermione said she would not be marrying Draco. She wondered if that was something Narcissa told him… “I’m actually quite glad to hear that. She’s the closest thing I feel I have to a mother. So, I’m glad to hear she hadn’t given up on me.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

She turned and kissed his arm where she lay on it. She felt lazy and exhausted for the first time, and the hand rubbing down her arm was delicious.

“Have you ever gone down to Australia?”

And she was wide awake again. “To… to see my parents?” He nodded. “No. No, I don’t… I don’t really think I’d want to see them if they didn’t remember me.” She let her eyes drift across the room. “If I had to pretend to be someone else.”

He continued his strokes on her arm. She counted them as they lay in silence. On the fourth one he said, “Have you looked into counter-curses?”

She felt her eyes drifting closed. “A little bit. There’s not been any success with reversing memory charms that deep. Removing an event is easy. You can recover it over time. But removing a person…” She swallowed and opened her eyes, not knowing they were closed. “It’s too many events.”

He nodded. She could feel it. He waited six strokes of his arm this time, before saying “I’m sorry you had to do that.”

Her eyes couldn’t open. But she nodded a bit. “I know.”

“And I’m sorry I was on that mission. The one at your house.”

“It’s fine,” she hummed. “You wouldn’t have hurt them.” She heard her voice drifting. “I saw it on your face.”

She counted nine more strokes against her arm before she fell asleep for good. After another three, his arm stilled.

~*~

She woke up in the dark. She turned to cuddle into Draco’s side, and fall back asleep again, but he wasn’t there.

She sat up. And looked around the dim room. Was he in the bathroom?

As her eyes adjusted, she found his form, sitting on the edge of the bed, at the foot. His back was to her.

“What are you doing?” she asked, voice groggy.

She watched as his back moved with every breath, slow and steady.

“Did Potter help you?”

She blinked. She pulled the duvet up around her chest. “What?”

“Potter helped you get to the memories?”

The room was cold. She was very awake. And he was very far away.

“I… I don’t know what you—“

“It’s just like Hogwarts, isn’t it? You and Potter running around under an Invisibility Cloak, doing whatever the fuck you want, while the rest of us have to play by the rules.”

Her throat was tight. She’d said something. As she was falling asleep. It was so clear now that it was the wrong thing to say.

“Draco. I’m … I’m sorry –“

“Do you know how difficult it was for me to release those memories to the Wizengamot, Granger?” His back was still to her. His voice was cold but quiet. “You know how hard I work to keep people out of my mind.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, begging to go back to sleep. This was so much worse now that she knew about his Occlumency.

“I wanted to know you,” she said. “I wanted to understand you.” She knew she should have better explanations than this. “I needed to know why your blood was on my living room walls.”

“I told you why,” he hissed. “You asked and I told you.”

“Never the whole truth. You always leave something out.”

He stood, very suddenly and whipped around to look at her. “Who says you’re entitled to the whole truth?”

His eyes were bright and hot. He’d put his boxers back on, and she was still naked in his bed, clutching the sheets to her. She pressed her lips together.

“I don’t know how to apologize for this,” she said, and her voice broke.

“Which ones,” he said.

“What?”

“Which ones did you watch? Or did you grab some popcorn and play them all?”

She took a deep breath. “No. Just two. The one at my house. And the night the Snatchers brought us to Malfoy Manor.”

His face twisted. “Why?”

She felt the tears blinding her. “I needed to know why you saved us. I needed to understand —”

He prowled to her. "*Why* do you keep using that word!" He came around the side of the bed. "I didn't *save* you, Granger," he snarled. "I did *nothing*." His eyes flickered. "You were screaming on my drawing room floor and I stood there."

She took a shaky breath. "That's not how I saw it."

"Oh, I'm so glad we both have seen these memories so now we can debate them," he snapped.

She clenched her jaw. "You did your best, Draco. You tried to help us then, and you would have helped me if there was an Auction. That's all I wanted to know about." She edged to the end of the bed, holding the sheets to her. "When you told me about the Auction for the first time, you told me you'd sell me for a profit. But your father told me something completely different."

Draco clenched his hands into fists and paced away from her.

"So, I had to know!" she called after him as he moved through the room. "And I could tell he was right. You would have saved me."

"There's that word again," he spat. He turned back to her and stalked to the bed. "You think I would have *saved* you at that Auction, Granger? You think I gathered all available funds, reached out to all relatives and contacts, so that I could set you free? Sent you running with a stolen wand?"

The breath heaved in her chest as she watched him, his eyes glinting at her.

"The room we passed on the way to mine? The first door? That was your room." He stopped in front of her, sneering. "You were never getting out of here." He smirked, shaking his head. "I don't know why I bothered lying about recognizing you that night. You were always going to end up a prisoner in Malfoy Manor."

Her neck was hot. "So, you're telling me that belonging to you would have been the same as any other Death Eater?" His eye twitched and she pressed on. "I would have served your dinner and been your entertainment at parties. *Crucio'd* when I disobeyed – at best. Passed around like a whore?"

His eye twitched again and he had to look away from her.

"I've had plenty of time to think on this, Draco, so let me know when to stop –"

"Stop."

She shook her head at him. "You would have saved me. It wouldn't have been freedom, but it would have been the best you could have done. You would have saved me from that life—"

"Do you think I would have been able to keep away from you?" He glared at her. "That you would have lived out your days here and remained untouched."

"Yes," she said. "Don't try to scare me, Draco. I know what kind of person you truly are."

“Ah, yes. You’ve seen the worst of me, haven’t you, Granger.” He sneered at her. He prowled to the doors to the balcony. “Just needed to tip a memory into a basin and it’s like we’ve known each other forever.”

She pounded her fists into the bed. “I’m sorry, Draco. I’m sorry. I didn’t think I had another choice. I wanted to know you. I wanted to understand you—“

He spun around. “Then ASK, Hermione. Don’t take!”

She felt the syllables of her given name hit her across the face, as if he’d actually slapped her. Practically the same words she’d used against him a few weeks ago, about not assuming things about her. And asking permission.

She felt the first tear fall.

“I’d like for you to leave.” He whispered it into the ground. She heard it bounce around the room. “Get out.”

She didn’t have anything else to say. She had no leg to stand on.

Draco turned, and headed into his washroom. He shut the door.

She sat there in his bed for two breaths. She stood, naked, and grabbed her dress from in front of his closet. She slipped her panties on, pulled the dress over her head, and grabbed her shoes.

She wanted to knock on the door. To beg him. To sit with her back against the wall until he came out and forgave her.

She left his room.

She had no idea where she was. She looked at the tapestries and walked to the end of the hall, looking both ways, wishing she already knew the layout of his wing. She turned and found a door, the room next to his.

Her room.

She swallowed. “Mippy.”

A *crack*.

“Miss!”

“Can you help me get out of here? Find me a fireplace?”

“What is Miss doing here so late!”

The little girl elf stared up at her with wide, sleepy eyes. Hermione felt more tears on her cheeks, and didn’t bother stopping them.

“Just…” She shook her head, closing her eyes. “…ruining everything.”

And for the second time in a handful of months, she found herself making a dramatic exit from Malfoy Manor, and the boy inside of it.

Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

We're coming to the end my lovelies! One more chapter after this.

Thank you all for your fabulous comments and kudos and support. Also, I made the Semi-Finals in the Enchanted Awards! I believe you have about a week left to vote for the finals! Take some time and look through the nominees and get out there and read some excellent fiction!

She couldn’t feel anything.

There was a hole inside of her, and every minute another piece fell into the gaping abyss, waiting to swallow her whole.

She had dug herself a grave, and she was content to lie in it.

At six in the morning, Ginny knocked softly on her door. She pushed it open.

“I saw your bag in the hallway,” she said. Hermione kept her eyes on her ceiling. “I thought you were staying the night.”

“Me too.”

The *pitter-patter* of Ginny’s feet on the floor. She climbed into bed next to her.

“What did he do?”

Ginny was on her side, facing her, head propped up on her arm.

“Nothing. He found out about the memories.”

Ginny stilled beside her. Hermione kept her unblinking eyes on her ceiling. They were dry and tired.

“Oh.”

“And then he asked me to leave.”

“Oh.”

Hermione swallowed. “You know, at Hogwarts, whenever Harry, Ron and I would do something dangerous or against the rules, I would plan a story in case we were caught. I was always prepared to speak to McGonagall or Dumbledore. Ready to tell them an excuse.” Hermione turned to look at Ginny, the blue eyes already on her. “I never thought he would find out. I never considered it. So, I had nothing.”

Ginny nodded.

“So, what did you end up saying?”

“’Sorry?’” Hermione chuckled darkly. She shrugged against her pillows, and turned back to the ceiling with a deprecating smile. “I told him I wanted to know him better.”

“Does he know you love him?”

Hermione’s cheeks flushed and she bit her lip. “No. Every time I have the opportunity, every time he asks me why I’ve done something for him… I tell him it was the right thing to do.”

“Which is basically the same thing for you,” Ginny said. Hermione looked at her again, and Ginny gave her a sad smile. “Does this mean you’re broken up?”

“We… weren’t really together, were we?” Hermione pressed her lips together. She sighed. “We weren’t going on dates, or going public with our relationship.”

“But that’s what you want, yes?” Ginny’s eyes were watching her. Hermione nodded. “Does he know that you want that?”

She felt her brows come together. “I… I’ve been just taking what I can get, honestly.” She shook her head.

“Maybe it’s time for you to set the rules, then.” Ginny was cocking a brow at her. She reminded her of Fred so much then.

“I don’t think he wants anything to do with me anymore,” she said. “Much less, going public to his staff, who all had to sign that Love Contract business.”

She felt Ginny roll out of the bed. “You’ll never know until you ask for it.”

~*~

She drifted through her Sunday. She went to class with Madame Bernard. She went to Cornerstone. Not a Malfoy in sight.

She went home. Ginny had asked Harry to come over and cook for them, so Hermione tried to be social for a few hours before retiring to bed, finding it exhausting to pretend she was fine and to ignore the lovely way the two of them interacted. Unafraid of being together. In love.

She was drowsy on the way in to work on Monday. Draco did not meet her with her coffee. She didn't expect him to.

It was Walter's first day back from his week at the Somerset Snidget Sanctuary, and they met to go over his notes and numbers before she headed to the conference room for the 9AM senior staff meeting.

He was already in the conference room when she entered, standing at the head of the table, flipping through paperwork. Wentworth and Blaise were seated, chatting through something. Draco looked up as she moved through the doorway, and then looked away.

As if she was nothing to him.

She pulled her chair out and sat. She flipped through her notes, and ignored the hands that moved paperwork around just inches from her.

She needed to speak to him in private, but she would need to spring it on him. She couldn't imagine him agreeing to a meeting with her today.

"Good morning, Granger." Blaise's voice sang to her across the table.

She looked up and he was grinning. "Good morning."

"How was your weekend?"

"Uh…" She looked down at her hands. "Not so great."

Blaise eyed her, and Draco kept his hands moving.

He began the meeting a few minutes later. His voice was the same. His mannerisms the same. As if nothing was bothering him. And maybe nothing was. Maybe he had resigned himself to this.

When it was her time to give a status report on her team, she stood. She read from her notes. She glanced about the room. She spoke eloquently. She sat.

Draco thanked her. Then they moved on to Wentworth. She listened.

Glancing up once, she found Blaise watching her, a curious expression.

When the meeting was done, she headed back to her office. She tried to organize her thoughts.

What an excellent reason for a Love Contract. Of course, for the sexual harassment problems, but more so, for the end of things.

A knock on her door frame, and Blaise was entering, shutting the door behind him. She stared at him as he stood at the door.

“So you guys broke up, huh?”

A hot spike of panic, followed by a chill of sadness.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her voice was even. She turned back to her desk.

“Yeah, whatever, Granger,” Blaise said, rolling his eyes. She heard him leave. And finally relaxed.

She had a three-hour meeting later with Draco and Waterstone. A very painful three hours. Draco wouldn’t look at her. He wasn’t completely ignoring her, still directing questions to her or nodding when he agreed, but to her, it was painfully obvious that he wanted nothing to do with her. It seemed he had spent the remainder of the weekend getting his walls back into place. He was impenetrable.

She wished he would just leave her and Waterstone to work, but a bit of micro-managing was to be expected. The werewolf trial started on Monday, a week away. The first big project of her department. Draco wanted to make sure everything ran smoothly.

On Tuesday morning, When Walter brought her mail in, Hermione’s hands stilled over a letter with a familiar return address. A university in California.

Noelle Ogden’s long awaited response.

Hermione rubbed her forehead. This was… just not the right time. Draco had expressly asked her not to write to Noelle. She’d disregarded his wishes and had done so.

Because she wanted to know him better. Just like the memories.

It took Hermione all day to decide what she would do with the letter. To not open a letter sent to you might result in opportunities missed, friendships curdled like forgotten cream. But to open it may result in far worse discoveries.

With an hour left of the work day, Hermione trudged her way to the office in the back corner. His door was ajar, so she let herself in and closed it behind her.

He glanced up at her, frown on his face, and back down at his papers.

“If this isn’t work related, I’m going to have to ask you to get out.”

She pressed her lips together, trying to keep any untoward comments from bursting through. She tossed the unopened letter from California on his desk. He stared at it, trying to decipher its meaning.

“I wrote to Noelle after you asked me not to. She’s just now gotten back to me.” She watched as his eyes flipped up to her, cold and steely. “I wanted to come clean. And let you decide if I get to open it or not.”

He glared at her, pulled his wand, and tapped the letter, setting fire to it.

She blinked as it crumpled and crisped.

Well, then…. That answered that.

He brought his attention back to his paperwork, and Hermione felt very dismissed. She took a deep breath, accepting her punishment, and started for the door.

“She misunderstood the situation. Nothing in that letter would have been factual anyway.”

Hermione turned back. Draco was still focused on what he was reading. “What situation?”

He looked up at her. “That night. With Marcus Flint.” His jaw tightened. She stood still near the door. “After you left with O’Connor, I didn’t handle things very well inside.”

Hermione tried to think of how Noelle would have seen it. Draco and Marcus getting in a fist fight in the middle of a pub. Hermione thought of how Aiden’s friend had described it to Aiden.

I guess right after we left, Malfoy went back inside and started wailing on Flint! I guess he was flirting with Noelle or something…

She nodded at the floor. “And you didn’t clear it up for her? Tell her what actually happened?”

“She was not my priority at the moment. Something I made abundantly clear to her afterwards.” He grimaced. “And I didn’t know how much of it you wanted to be public knowledge.”

She bit her lip, thinking that she also hadn’t wanted Draco dragged through the mud with her in the press should she have gone to the Auror’s Office about Flint.

“She told her father that I was brash, and unstable. Not someone to invest in.” Draco tapped his quill on the parchment in front of him.

“That could have been easily cleared up, Draco. I would have happily written to Noelle or her father.” She wanted to step toward him, but refrained.

“The damage was done. I didn’t want you involved any more than you already had been.”

She tried to think of anything else she wanted to say on this matter. She nodded, and turned back toward the door.

“Any other backstabbing secrets you’ve been holding onto Granger?” She turned, and his eyes were cold again. “It’s Tuesday. I’m starting to wonder if a tenth of my inheritance will

transfer into my accounts tonight at 9PM."

She raised a brow at him and grabbed the door handle. "It probably will." She let herself out.

~*~

Thursday was publicity day for the Golden Snidget campaign. She had the *Prophet* and the *Quibbler* coming to do a write up on the project, and Ginny, Harry, Rolf Scamander and Viktor Krum were coming to give interviews and have their photos taken as part of the "Save the Snidgets" campaign that would run in magazines and newspapers.

She felt like all her projects were actually moving forward, all within the same week. Today was publicity for the Golden Snidgets, which would print on Sunday, and the werewolf trial at the Wizengamot was scheduled to begin Monday. She had an incredibly busy week. Which was excellent, as it helped her not to concentrate on how awful she felt.

Yesterday had been just as strained as Monday and Tuesday. She had needed to prep the office on the Snidget campaign, so that if Rita went poking around in strange places, she would find a unified team. She and Walter addressed the whole floor on Wednesday afternoon, giving them basic information and talking points. Draco stood in his office doorway, arms crossed, shoulder leaning on the frame, and eyes off of her. Eventually he disappeared into his office, shutting the door behind him.

A *ding* of the lifts and a pair of heels marching their way to her office brought her back to the present.

"Darling!"

Hermione looked up, and Pansy Parkinson, tan and glorious, was pushing her way into the room carrying shopping bags and boxes.

"How I've missed you!"

Hermione blinked. "Me?"

"Yes, you! My model! My muse!" Pasny started dropping the bags in a chair and pushing the boxes onto Hermione's desk, almost tipping her inkpot. "I found so many goodies for you while I was in Italy."

As she scurried to save the paperwork on her desk that was slowly being plowed over, Hermione said, "Did you have a good time?"

"The best! I'll tell you all about it, but let's get set up for the publicity shoot today, hm?"

Pansy conjured a rack, and clothes started flying out of the bags and boxes, landing perfectly on the hangers.

As Pansy shoved her behind a changing curtain with an arm full of dresses to try, Hermione realized that she hadn't seen Pansy Parkinson since before the Valentine's Day Gala. Was it only three weeks ago?

She stared at the fabrics in her arms. Had she and Draco only lasted three weeks before they imploded?

Rita Skeeter arrived at 11AM, an hour before she was invited. While Daphne and Tracey started on her makeup, she heard Skeeter talking to Draco up front, asking questions about the werewolf trial next week, operations at the office, his thoughts on the Golden Snidget campaign. Rita's voice carried across the floor, and the scratching of her Quick Quotes Quill started grating on her ears, but Draco kept his tones deep and calm. She could only catch a word or two of his responses.

"And, Draco dear, how's your love life? Anyone special right now?" Rita's sing-song drifted through Hermione's office door. She swallowed, straining to hear Draco's response. She heard his rumble, a hiss of words, and a clattering of consonants, but couldn't piece together what he'd said.

Skeeter laughed. A high-pitched crystal sound that made Hermione's eye twitch.

"You ready?"

Hermione looked up and Daphne was hovering over her face with a lip pencil. Daphne raised a knowing brow at her. Hermione realized she'd been biting her lip. She released it and nodded.

Daphne looked over Hermione's shoulder at Tracey, taming her curls, and smirked before descending on her with the lip pencil.

A moment later, Pansy was shoving her into a purple dress with buttons down the front, and she was greeting Skeeter at the front. Draco excused himself, and Skeeter started her onslaught of questions on Hermione. Bozo was in the conference room, setting up backdrops and clearing space for the pictures.

The elevator doors dinged behind her just as Skeeter began asking her about her personal life, and Hermione turned to see Luna Lovegood standing inside the lift, eyes dreamy and wide.

"Luna!" Hermione smiled. "Are you representing the *Quibbler?*"

"Hello, Hermione." Luna danced out of the lift and let Hermione hug her tightly. "My father's come down with a terrible case of Norflax Flu, so I stepped in. I'm glad I get to spend time with you."

"Norflax Flu?" Rita Skeeter scoffed.

"Yes, it's a terrible cold caused by contact with a Norwegian Flaxson. They are native to Scandinavia." Luna brought a hand up to fiddle with her earrings.

"Oh. Has your father been to Scandinavia recently?" Hermione asked.

"No." Luna smiled, like she was ready to answer more questions.

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it and nodded, and brought Luna and Rita to the conference room.

Once Harry and Ginny arrived, she was much calmer, focused on the task at hand. Ginny went to change into her Holyhead Harpies uniform, and while Skeeter begged Harry to put on his old Gryffindor Quidditch uniform "for old times' sake" – with a bat of her eyes – Harry managed to decline.

Rolf Scamander arrived, looking very out of place, and Hermione gave him a hug.

"I'm not a Quidditch player, Hermione," he said, eyes flitting nervously around the room. "I'm just somebodies' grandson."

"And that's all I'm asking you to be." Hermione smiled at him, and he disappeared into the conference room.

The lift doors opened and Viktor Krum appeared looking like he'd just come from a previous magazine shoot. Several of the workers who had met him last week waved and jumped up to greet him. He spotted Hermione and he headed straight for her, smiling and leaning in to kiss each cheek again.

And that was the perfect time for Draco to exit his office, reappearing for his interviews. Hermione looked at him and he looked away, heading for Krum to shake his hand.

"Thanks for being here, Krum." Draco's face was tight, and he disappeared into the conference room before Viktor could respond.

Viktor gestured for her to enter first, and she walked into the craze of the publicity day.

Bozo had removed the table and had set up a few backdrops, one of a Quidditch pitch for the Quidditch players and one of a stone wall for Harry and Rolf. Rita was currently dripping off of Harry, living for every word he said about the wedding planning, and Rolf was talking to Luna, looking far more comfortable than she'd ever seen him. Hermione smiled as she watched the two of them.

"Excuse me, everyone," she bellowed, and the room quieted. "Thank you all so much for being here. Here's how today is going to work. The photographer will take a few shots of each person for their advertisement. These will go in magazines, newspapers, on flyers, with our message 'Save the Snidgets.' Then Luna and Rita will take some time to ask a few questions for their periodicals. Harry only has a short time with us before he needs to get back to the Ministry, so we'll have Bozo start with him." She looked around. "And maybe we'll have Rolf start with Luna and Rita."

Rita looked nonplussed. Pansy, Daphne and Tracey were at the ready for those being photographed, and everyone else just milled about the conference room, waiting for their turn. She found Viktor at her elbow more often than not, and tried to engage in conversation with everyone.

Everyone except Draco, of course.

Rita was done with Rolf quite early, and was eagerly awaiting the deposit of Harry Potter into her interview chair, but Hermione watched as Luna continued to ask him questions about his current projects and his grandfather's relationship with the Golden Snidgets.

As they moved through the group and Harry left, Ginny stayed, hovering around watching.

"This is going well, Hermione."

"Thanks, Gin."

"But you haven't interacted with him at all," Ginny said.

"Yes," she sighed. "I know."

Draco and Pansy were chatting in the corner. She was smiling and whispering about Viktor Krum's photoshoot. He was frowning.

As Krum finished, Bozo was now done with their guests. It was time for Hermione and Draco to be photographed as Krum moved into the interview chair. Ginny bid her goodbyes, and Draco moved to the stone background. Pansy fluttered to Hermione and began fussing with the dress and her hair.

Hermione took her pictures as well, trying her best to come off as someone who wanted to save a species, whatever that looked like. When she was done, Krum was still being interviewed.

"How about the two of you." Bozo gestured with his camera, like it was an extension of his arm. She followed the lens to see he was pointing at her and Draco.

"Oo yes!" Pansy clapped her hands. "The pair that put this all together!"

"No, that's not necessary," Hermione started, but Pansy was already dragging Draco back to the stone backdrop.

They stood there, separately. Shoulder-to-shoulder. The bulb flashed. Pansy frowned.

"Alright," she laughed. "A little looser?"

Hermione tried bringing her hand up on her hip, tilting her head. She bumped Draco's side and they moved away from each other.

Pansy looked horrified. She came in and had Draco stand behind her. She kept Hermione's hand on her hip, and had Draco bring his hand onto her other hip. Hermione could feel him warm behind her. Draco put his other hand in his pocket.

The bulb flashed a few times.

"Now this time, like you care?" Pansy tried.

Hermione set her face, ignoring the light hand on her hip, just where he loved to touch her.

They sprang apart from each other once Bozo allowed them to. Viktor was finished, so Hermione bid him goodbye as the room watched. She felt very stiff as he tried to kiss her cheeks goodbye again and asked if they could get together sometime soon.

She smiled and tried to act naturally as Rita Skeeter's eyes drilled into them.

After Hermione and Draco finished their interviews, Pansy and Hermione headed back to her office, passing Daphne and Blaise talking in the corner. They moved away from each other as Pansy and Hermione approached.

Hermione didn't have the brain capacity for this revelation. She was fried.

Once inside the office, Pansy helped her take off that dress, and suggested they try on her outfits for trial on Monday. She gave her a navy dress to try on behind the changing curtain. As Hermione slipped it over her head, she heard Pansy's voice call to her.

"So, what did I miss while I was in Italy?"

Hermione's hands stilled. Well, quite a bit.

"Um, nothing really." Hermione stayed behind the curtain longer than necessary.

"Mmhmm," Pansy hummed. "How long were the two of you together before he fucked it up?"

Hermione closed her eyes. She should have known better than to try to pull a fast one on Pansy Parkinson. She emerged from behind the curtain, and Pansy was folding clothing, looking at her with a smirk.

"Er… barely three weeks. And he didn't fuck up. I did." She slipped into the shoes Pansy had laid out for her.

Pansy laughed. "Not likely." Pansy came to her, and started tugging at the sleeves and pulling the fabric around her ribs. "I highly doubt that anything you could do would cause any kind of damage, Granger."

Hermione let her eyes glaze on the wall. "I broke into the Ministry and viewed the memories he provided to the Wizengamot."

She felt Pansy pause. "Wow, Granger. Wow."

Hermione looked at her and found Pansy grinning. She swallowed.

Pansy knelt at her side and started pinning the hem. "You'll be fine. Just give him a bit of space."

Hermione wanted to believe her, Draco's ex, but she couldn't. "I don't know. You didn't see his face. How betrayed he was. I think… I think I really botched it."

Pansy was silent as her fingers worked. Hermione glanced down at her and Pansy was grinning.

“What?” Hermione asked.

Pansy took a breath, and bit her lip. Hermione waited four more breaths before she finally spoke.

“Do you remember how you used to catch the two of us snogging in the hallways, Granger?”

Hermione suddenly felt very awkward. “Er… yes.”

Pansy pulled a pin from her teeth. “It took me a long time – longer than I’d like to admit – to figure out that he only met with me on Thursday and Saturday nights. And an even longer time to realize that he would choose spots along your Prefect patrol route.”

Pansy smiled up at her. And flipped the hem over to hand stitch it.

Hermione was frozen. Her heart beating hard and fast as she looked down on this girl in panic.

Pansy turned her attention back to the dress. “It wasn’t until sixth year when he whispered your name to me,” she said, pursing her lips sadly. “And even then I tried to ignore it for a few months.”

Hermione swallowed. Her eyes watering.

“He’s been waiting for you for a long time, Granger,” Pansy said. “Just give him a bit more time.” She shrugged and stood. “Let him have his tantrum. And when he’s done crying he’ll remember why he fought so hard for you.”

Hermione stared at her, and all she managed to say was “I’m sorry, Pansy.”

“It’s not your fault.” Pansy flipped her hair. “I have terrible taste in men.” Her eyes widened gleefully. “Did you know Theo Nott is gay??”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“He’s so handsome.”

“I know. I tried. I turned him gay.”

Hermione laughed, and Pansy fixed one of her stray curls, twisting it back for her.

Pansy and Hermione spent another hour and a half laughing and talking boys, and Hermione felt any residual guilt melt off of her.

Pansy left, and Hermione tried to wait. Tried to give him time. She really did.

But she had to see him.

She'd been holed up in her office with Pansy for almost two hours, and she hadn't seen any of her staff since the morning, before the publicity shoot. She headed towards his office, but as she approached she saw his light was off. She checked her timepiece. It was 4PM.

"He's gone."

Hermione turned, and Blaise was flipping through some papers behind her.

"He left as soon as he heard."

Hermione frowned at him. "Heard what?"

Blaise looked up at her, brow furrowed. "You don't know yet?"

She felt her ribs pull, and she shook her head at him.

"Lucius Malfoy was stabbed this morning. He's at St. Mungo's in critical condition."

~*~

There were reporters and cameras outside of St. Mungo's and at the Apparition point. She heard Skeeter calling her name, saying things like "Hermione, dear! You'll tell them to let me in, yes?"

Hermione headed straight for the reception desk where the Welcome Witch directed her up to the third floor – "Wounds – Magical & Natural." She stood in the lifts, listening to the Healers talk their office gossip in hushed voices.

On the third floor, she followed signs to the private suites, and once she saw a rather conspicuous D.M.L.E. officer, "disguised" as a waiting room visitor, she knew she was headed in the right direction.

She turned a corner, and at the end of the hall were two blond heads. Narcissa stood next to a door, on the other side of a stationed guard, and Draco leaned against the wall a bit further away. He lifted himself off the wall and moved slowly across the tiles to the other wall.

Narcissa, Draco and the guard made a beautiful picture, this far away. Still. Silent. There were two chairs next to Draco, but neither he nor his mother looked inclined to sit.

Narcissa saw her first. She smiled tightly. "Hermione, dear."

She saw Draco tense and then turn his gaze on her, still down the hallway. His eyes cut her open, but he quickly looked away, muttering something.

Narcissa walked to meet her. They hugged in the middle of the hallway, a few paces from Draco and the chairs he wouldn't sit in. Narcissa gathered her close, and if she knew any of the situation between Hermione and her son, she didn't show it.

"It's so kind of you to come, Hermione." Narcissa pulled back and held her face between her delicate fingers. She brushed a strand a hair back into place for her, and Hermione felt so warm inside her chest.

"Do you know anything yet?" Hermione glanced over Narcissa's shoulder and saw Draco frowning at the ground. "Is there anyone in custody?"

"No, nothing like that yet." Narcissa ran her hands down Hermione's arms. "But it seems a guard was placed under the Imperius curse this morning, and was ordered to attack him. They're still trying to figure out if the knife had any magical properties."

"An Azkaban guard did this?" Hermione looked at the door shielding Lucius Malfoy from the rest of the world. "That's preposterous."

Draco snorted. Both women turned to look at him, and he ignored them, moving down the hall, further from them.

Narcissa turned back to her. "Sit with me?"

"Of course."

Narcissa led her to the two chairs, holding her hand in hers. They sat silently for a moment until a Healer-in-Training appeared down the hall. She walked briskly towards them, and Hermione felt Narcissa hold her breath. The girl smiled shyly and then entered a door across from them – a supply room. The girl grabbed what she needed, then shut the door behind her, nodding politely before darting away. Narcissa relaxed again, and stared down at her knees.

"Draco tells me that the first Wizengamot date is set for next week."

Hermione looked back to Narcissa, ignoring the movement from the figure down the hall. "Yes, Monday. We're just about ready."

"That's wonderful." Narcissa smiled at her, then turned to look at Draco. Hermione saw the woman's eyebrow lift in a lovely judgmental way. Narcissa looked back at Hermione, innocently. "Dear, would you like anything at the café upstairs?"

"Oh, no, thank you." She saw Draco roll his eyes in the distance and caught on a second too late. "But, I can run and grab you something—"

"No, I think I'm just going to use the restroom." Narcissa stood, and Hermione was just about to say she needed to use the restroom as well, when Narcissa did what Narcissa did best: She meddled. "Will you wait for me here?"

Hermione took a breath and nodded. Narcissa patted her shoulder and left Hermione sitting alone in a hallway with Draco Malfoy and a silent guard.

She tried to think of something to say that wasn't as moronic as "how are you?" and failed. She was just opening her mouth to say exactly that when he spoke.

"What are you doing here?"

She glanced up at him, his eyes still on the tiles beneath his feet. His lips were tight.

"I wanted to be here for you and your mother." She watched as he rolled his shoulders back.

"You should be preparing for the trial next week."

"I'm prepared."

He lifted his head, staring at the wall across from him. "Someone needs to be in charge of the office—"

"Blaise has it handled."

Draco pursed his lips.

"I understand if you don't want me here," she said. "And I'll go if it will make things easier. But I wanted to make sure Narcissa was alright."

Draco clenched his jaw. He shifted on his feet and looked down the hallway in the opposite direction.

They were silent for what felt like a million heartbeats.

"It was a knife?" she asked.

He nodded.

"And an Azkaban guard was under the Imperius curse?"

"That's what they say."

She studied him. His hands were in his pockets and his hair fell around his eyes. He looked very tired.

"Have you seen him yet?"

He shook his head. "Not until he's stable."

She heard the click of Narcissa's shoes down the hall. She returned with a cup of tea and a few treats. She handed Draco a pumpkin pasty, encouraging him to eat it. Draco rolled his eyes and Hermione smiled. Narcissa offered her a few treats and she politely declined.

Narcissa and she sat for the next thirty minutes, chatting intermittently about nothing at all, staying away from the topic of the man lying in a hospital bed behind the door.

Whenever Draco crossed the hallway, pacing, she'd watch him. One might mistake him for bored, if they didn't know to look for the tightness in his jaw, the clenching and unclenching of his fists, the movement in a rather still person.

The door to Lucius's room opened, and rather suddenly everything was in motion again.

A Healer exited, older and clearly in charge. Narcissa jumped up. Draco pulled himself off the wall. The Healer stepped forward to speak with them and Hermione stood, trying to move behind Narcissa so she wouldn't intrude.

"We've repaired the damage to his internal organs," he said, directly to Narcissa. "It is still possible that the knife was magical or had been dipped in poison. We have a curse-breaker looking at it now, but based on preliminary sweeps of the wound, there is no magic or poison."

Narcissa nodded, eyes wide.

"What does that mean?" Draco huffed.

The Healer turned to him. "We expect him to make a full recovery."

Hermione watched as Narcissa nodded, hands twisting around themselves. Draco was still.

"I do need to go over some paperwork with you, Mrs. Malfoy—"

"Black," Draco said. He was frozen in place watching the Healer speak.

"Yes, of course, Ms. Black," the Healer corrected himself. "He's resting right now, but will be ready for visitors soon."

"Yes…" Narcissa looked around the hallway. "Well, I'll come with you now for the paperwork."

She turned without another glance at Draco or Hermione, and followed the Healer down the hallway.

Hermione faced Draco, his eyes still focused on the spot the Healer had been. His jaw clenched and released. His left eye twitched. She watched him swallow and take a breath in, listening to the air rattle like a Dementor.

She recognized this. She'd seen it on him in his memories, right before he broke.

He pushed the air out of his chest, and looked down at the tiles. She approached him slowly.

"Draco…"

He spun away from her, squeezing his eyes shut, and pressing his palms against his face. She looked up, and the guard was averting his gaze, shuffling his feet. No one else was in the hallway, but it was a very public place.

Draco's head rose quickly, and the hand that had been reaching for him returned to her side. He looked around the hallway with hot eyes, like he wanted to destroy something. She came to his side, and grabbed his hand as it fisted.

His chest was heaving, and his eyes were wet.

"Draco."

And he grabbed her hand, and held it close to him as he doubled over. A sound tore from his throat, a sob. He leaned on her and she brought her free hand to run her fingers through his hair.

"Why won't he just die."

Hermione's fingers froze. She didn't know how to help this. She didn't know how it felt to wish someone was dead. Someone who was her own flesh and blood.

She moved through his hair again, and he leaned into her more. She looked up and the guard was letting his eyes wander to them. A Mediwitch rounded the hall, looking at a chart.

"Shh," she cooed. "Come with me."

Hermione opened the door to the supply closet and pulled him inside. Once the door was shut behind them his voice broke on another sob.

It was dark in the closet, and she thought about casting a silencing charm and finding the light, but then he fell forward, onto his knees and wrapped his arms around her hips, pressing his wet face against her chest.

She stopped breathing.

"I wanted him to die," he choked.

She brushed her hands through his hair, and felt him breathe again.

"I know." She felt the tears prick at her own eyes.

His arms tightened around her hips, pressing himself closer to her, and a broken sob pushed out of him, into her chest. He buried his face against her, and she held him, letting her fingers move through his hair, across his neck, down his shoulders and up again. She repeated this several times as his breath slowed. She felt his hot exhales against her stomach.

She heard him sniff as he moved his head, and she wondered if her dress was wet from his tears. The arms that looped around her hips loosened before his hands slid up her ribs, resting on her back. His face pressed against her stomach, then her sternum, and as he rose from his knees, she realized he was pressing his lips against her as his mouth touched down between her breasts.

She gasped, and his arms held her tight as his lips pressed against her chest, her collarbone, and then her neck. He whispered, hot against her ear, "I miss you."

She felt her breath coming quickly as he kissed her just below her ear, pressing her into the door.

“Draco.”

He ran his hands across her back, slipping forward to run against her stomach.

This probably wasn’t the most opportune time to… whatever this was.

His hands cupped her cheeks, kissing her mouth and letting his tongue push against hers. She sighed into him, and let him kiss her.

She pushed lightly at his shoulders.

“Draco. Not now.” His eyes refocused on her, his face still pink and wet. He started to close off from her, like rejection, and she pulled his face to hers again for a soft kiss. His lips tried to move against hers and she pulled away. “You have to go back out there.”

He sighed, pressing his forehead against hers. She moved her thumbs across his cheeks, brushing away the remaining tears, and trailing her fingers into the hair at his temples.

He let her pull him out of the supply closet, back into the too bright hallway. The guard was resolutely looking elsewhere.

“I need to…” Draco started. “I can’t see him yet.” He wiped his eyes, and Hermione took in his face, pink and splotchy, and the skin below his eyes puffy. He had undoubtedly been crying. It was so easy to tell. She hadn’t seen true tears on him since he was a child. “I’ll check on mother with the paperwork, find a washroom.”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll be here.”

He looked at her, as if it surprised him. She gave him a small smile.

He nodded and turned to head down the hallway, her hand pulling from his as he moved away. She hadn’t realized he was holding it. She watched him go, and turned to look at the guard, staring down at the tiles. She wandered toward the chairs again, but didn’t want to sit.

“He’s awake.”

Hermione looked up and the guard was watching her.

“Oh,” she said. “Wonderful.”

He shrugged. “You’re on the list, if you’d like to see him.”

She blinked at him. “The what?”

“The list of approved visitors. Hermione Granger is on Lucius Malfoy’s list.”

She felt her heart in her throat. “And when did he make this list if he’s been unconscious?”

“It’s in the Azkaban paperwork, so I’m not sure when your name was added. But before today.”

She looked beyond him to the door. She held her breath knowing she was an idiot.

“Okay.”

He nodded at her and gestured for her to enter.

She pushed open the door, feeling the weight of the moment. The moment that was supposed to be reserved for blood relatives only.

Sparse room. Light blue curtains on the window and long privacy drapes around the bed in the center of the room. There were flowers on the windowsill and she was curious to know if they were for show or if someone had actually cared for Lucius Malfoy enough to send them. She heard her own footsteps against the linoleum, clapping in the silent room as she rounded the privacy curtain to find Lucius Malfoy, propped up in bed, like he’d just finished a stay at a spa.

“Miss Granger.” His lips turned up in the corners. “I was hoping you would be here.”

Besides the hospital gown, the hospital bed, and the pale shade to his skin, there was no difference between the sight of him now, and her visit to him in Azkaban. He wore the same curious gaze, his hair pulled into the same style, and his superior attitude had not wilted one bit.

“Mr. Malfoy.” She stood one step from the foot of his bed. “I’m surprised to find that I was included on your visitor list.” She heard her voice, measured and controlled. She hoped her face gave the same façade.

“Of course, Miss Granger.” His eyes sparkled at her. “You’re practically family, after all.”

Hermione felt a shiver, starting at the top of her spine and shooting through her like the Cruciatus curse.

She looked closer, and found the thin skin around the eyes, the delicate way he was propped against the pillows, the drowsy tilt of his head. She had nothing to be afraid of. This man had played all his cards when he told Draco about the classes. And he clearly posed no physical threat to her. It was a mental match she had to prepare for.

She took a deep breath and looked him directly in the eyes. “Why did you tell Draco about the classes? What *possible* motivation could you have had for that?”

He smirked at her, so different and so similar to Draco. “I assumed he already knew. I had no idea the two of you would keep *secrets* from each other.”

He was toying with her, like a mouse. She summoned something deep inside of herself and felt her brow curve upwards.

“How boring it must be. To be in Azkaban with no one to play with.” She stepped forward, and brought her hands down to lean on the rail at the foot of his bed. “Were things getting a bit too comfortable for you?” She quirked her head to the side and saw his eyes follow her. “Narcissa wasn’t speaking to you. Your son’s inheritance – the only thing that still tied him to you – was leaking away. And *I* was playing by your rules.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Was it time to spice things up?”

His lips twitched. She watched as his eyes ran over her face, a smile spreading on his cheeks.

“How different you are, Miss Granger,” he sang. She squeezed the bedrail and kept her eyes as clear as she could. “I could credit Madame Michele for refining your approach, Miss Parkinson for styling you just so, or Miss Truesdale for teaching you how to move…” He let his eyes wander across her form, and she held her ground. “But it’s something else as well,” he said, eyes meeting hers again.

She sent him an icy stare, and let the sarcasm drip into her voice. “Now, now. Don’t say it was ‘in me all along.’ Not when I’ve gone through all this trouble.”

He smiled. Almost a true smile. He looked directly into her eyes and said, “You’ll make a fine Lady Malfoy for him, Miss Granger.”

Any confidence she had left her in a puff of air. She felt her eye twitch, and her lungs seize. She pulled up from her arrogant lean forward on the bedrail, and lost all idea of what to do with her hands.

She searched his face for his game. And found almost a fondness there. There was acceptance. There was pride. And if she reached deep into his eyes, she could almost see an expression lost in her memory, one that belonged to her own father.

What was he doing? What game was this?

“I don’t understand,” she breathed.

“You know, Miss Granger,” he said, looking to the window on his left. “The Malfoy inheritance is only to be released on the heir’s wedding day. It’s been that way for centuries. And it would only be released should the bride be approved of.” He turned back and grinned at her. “You would have taken those classes sooner or later. Draco wanted the inheritance sooner. So, I upped the timeline.”

Hermione felt her hands shaking. She shouldn’t have come in here.

The confidence he had. The feeling of inevitability. Pansy’s sad smile as she flipped her hem this morning. Blaise’s gentle probing this week. Narcissa and her hugs and grins and gentle touches and mothering eyes and family diamonds.

“Once you released the inheritance, you wouldn’t have had any control over his bride,” she whispered. “So, you manipulated me into taking the classes.”

“Come now, Miss Granger. You manipulated yourself. I hardly had to do a thing.”

He grinned without malice. Without a conniving plan. It was like he'd played his final card, and the deck had been swept away already.

She felt angry tears in her eyes. "Why did you do all this? Why did you interfere?" She closed her eyes, thinking of Blaise, Pansy, Narcissa. Ginny and Harry. Marcus Flint even… "All of you."

"I've already told you, Miss Granger," he chuckled. She opened her eyes to see him looking at her softly. "Everything I do, I do for my son."

She thought of his "proposal" last November. Take the classes, wedding in the gazebo, shadow Narcissa at society balls, and she could have had him.

She shook her head, pressing her lips together. "Well, Mr. Malfoy. Was it worth it? This game you've set up, with pawns and queens. Was it worth your pending divorce and your destroyed relationship with your son? They'll never want to see you again."

She tried to hiss at him, but she could only look on sadly.

"Oh, I don't know about that, Miss Granger." He lifted an arrogant brow. "I believe they're just on the other side of this door."

She blinked at him. And a chill swept through her as a piece clicked into place. She stepped back. "Was the guard even Imperius'd?"

Lucius grinned at her. Proudly. Fatherly.

"He's been well compensated, Miss Granger. I assure you," Lucius said. "It was about time to… what did you call it?" He smirked at her. "Oh, yes. Spice things up."

The door burst open and she turned to find Draco's hot eyes on her.

"Get away from him."

She felt her breath coming in short spontaneous movements. She stepped back from the bed, seeing the betrayed expression on his face as he rounded the privacy curtain, and turned to his father. She watched as Lucius smiled.

"Draco. So good of you to come."

The anger rippled through Draco's shoulders as he stepped in front of her, shielding her from his father's view.

"Stay away from her. Don't talk to her."

"Draco, she came to find *me*."

"Don't." It burst from her. She looked Lucius Malfoy in the eye until she saw it land on him. "Stop using me against him. The game is done." She held his pale eyes until he looked away, almost pouting, resigned.

“Hermione, please leave us alone,” Draco said.

Her name on his lips paused her. She took one last look at Lucius Malfoy, hoping she’d never see or hear from him again in her lifetime, and knowing it was a foolish wish.

Draco touched her arm, pulling her gaze back to him. “Please go.” His eyes were soft. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She turned to find Narcissa standing quietly in the doorway, just out of her husband’s sight. She gave Hermione a tired smile.

Hermione brushed her fingers across Draco’s hand on her arm, and looked up at him and nodded. His eyes flew to her lips, and she wished he would kiss her goodbye.

She turned, pulling from Draco’s grasp, and approached Narcissa in the doorway. Narcissa touched her shoulder as she passed, a gentle comfort, and Hermione exited.

Narcissa stepped fully into the room, and Hermione wondered at this family reunion. The first time Hermione had seen the three of them in the same space since the Great Hall at Hogwarts, all pale and shaken, Lucius trying to hold onto his pride, Narcissa trying to hold onto her son, and Draco trying to hold onto his control. And Hermione, looking in on them.

Narcissa closed the door behind herself.

She nodded at the guard and walked down the long hallway to the exits.

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

> Hermione felt the pounding in her ears again. She would see him for the first time since the Great Hall, gaunt and stricken at the Slytherin table with his mother clutching his arm. She hadn't meant to look for him. Not in the corridors, not beneath the white sheets of the fallen, not on the way to the Chamber of Secrets with Ron, but she was a stupid girl.

Chapter Notes

> Oh, my dears. We've come to the end. I'm so honored that you shared this journey with me. From those of you who have been with me from the beginning, to those who are brand new, thank you.
>
> Also, I'm pleased to announce that I received the following awards in the 2018 Enchanted Awards:
> RUNNER UP: Best In-Character Hermione
> RUNNER UP: Best Work in Progress
> WINNER: Admin Brittani's pick for Favorite of the Season

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After leaving St. Mungo’s, Hermione headed back to the office to close up and grab the belongings she’d left behind, including her dance bag.

She had her very last lesson with Miss Truesdale tonight. Then on Saturday, her last lesson with Monseiur DuBois, and on Sunday morning her last lesson with Madame Bernard. Tuesday would be her last lesson with Madame Michele, and the last tenth of the inheritance would transfer at 9PM.

She spent some time answering letters and catching up on her desk, reading the evening *Prophet* detailing as much of Lucius Malfoy’s condition as Skeeter knew. She left the office with five minutes to spare before her lesson, Apparating to a point several blocks away from the small dance studio. Hermione was glad to be done with these classes, but even more so after her conversation with Lucius Malfoy that day.

You would have taken those classes sooner or later.

She shook her head to clear it as she sprinted inside, quickly shucking her scarf, coat, and mittens, and hanging them on the coat rack in the tiny lobby area just outside the studio door.

She kicked off her rain boots, strapped on the little ballet slippers, and grabbed the two-inch heels that Miss Truesdale had her practice in. She was so glad Pansy had her in a dress today, or else she would have to change into one of the studio's rehearsal skirts.

She turned to rush into the studio, with seconds to spare, and found Draco. Sitting in the tiny lobby waiting area, watching her.

She gasped in shock, then flushed in embarrassment at her own melodrama.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, hand over her heart. "Is everything – Is your father doing alright?"

He nodded and stood, placing his hands in his pockets. Still watching her.

"Then why are you…" She caught her breath. Was he here to shame her about the classes? To forbid her to help him anymore? "I'm taking these classes, Draco," she tried, firmly. "I only have one more week left, and I intend to finish. The inheritance will transfer and that's that. I made a deal."

He nodded at the floor. She watched him, waiting. He gave her a small smirk and pulled the door open, holding it for her. "After you."

She stared at him, not comprehending. She felt her feet move, and entered the bright studio, feeling him follow her.

Miss Truesdale was at the gramophone, her back to them.

"Miss Granger, you are two minutes late." Her stern voice carried to them across the hardwood floors.

Hermione opened her mouth to apologize, but Draco cut her off.

"I'm afraid that was my fault, Miss Truesdale."

The ex-ballerina spun around in a delicate twirl, and when her eyes landed on Draco, they shone.

"Young Mr. Malfoy! What a lovely surprise." The seventy-year-old woman – who still insisted on being called "miss" – let her eyes wander down Draco's form as he crossed the floor, smiling at her and taking her hand to kiss her knuckles. "You have been so missed."

Draco grinned, and Hermione tried not to roll her eyes, wondering if these teachers who sang his praises actually remembered his talents, or if they were just enamored by him and his mother. Was he really this excellent at *everything?*

Miss Truesdale asked Draco about Narcissa, gave her condolences on his father's health, and flicked her wand at the gramophone, shooing Hermione like a fly towards the ballet bar.

Hermione frowned at the old bat, and began her warm-up. She tried to ignore the chatter from them, focusing on why Draco was here, sitting in a chair at the front of the room.

Miss Truesdale's voice floated to her. "If you are here to check on her progress, Mr. Malfoy, I am sorry to report that she needs *much* more time and focus to truly compare to girls her age."

Hermione pressed her lips together to keep from barking back as she came down from her final position at the bar. She heard Draco chuckle. Miss Truesdale waved her wand and footprints appeared on the studio floor, laying out the routine she would be learning.

"Miss Granger," she said. "We will learn Viennese Waltz formations today. Change your shoes."

Hermione quickly swapped her ballet flats for the practice heels and joined Miss Truesdale at the center of the room. The older woman one-two-three'd her way across the floor. Hermione watched the woman's feet match perfectly on each footprint, spinning in circles, and confusing Hermione's eyes.

When Hermione stepped up to try it, she avoided Draco's stare. It felt like flying class at Hogwarts all over again, everyone watching as the know-it-all found something she didn't know.

She stumbled over the footprints several times, and heard a "tsk tsk" from the general direction of the gramophone.

"You see, Mr. Malfoy? She is unfocused and uncoordinated."

"Hm," Draco chuckled, and she ignored his eyes on her. "Perhaps she's been working too long without a partner."

She looked at him, feet fumbling as he approached her. She stared at him in horror as he reached for her hand and her waist.

"Er, I don't quite know the steps yet –"

"Come on, Granger. Let me take you for a spin."

She watched as he slipped one hand across her ribs as the other grasped her hand. She heard the music start up, and looked down at her feet as Miss Truesdale counted them in.

"Look at me," he whispered, and she looked into his eyes just as he stepped forward. She countered back. She held his stare as he turned them to face the corner of the room, and as his palm on her ribs guided her to step a certain way. She didn't blink away from him when Miss Truesdale called out, something about staying on her toes.

They returned to center, and his eyes were smirking at her. Miss Truesdale was giving notes, leathery fingers tilting her head, and prodding at her spine. She tried to concentrate on the feeling of being in his arms.

Working too long without a partner.

When they tried again, adding a bit more complexity, she focused on the feeling of Draco's thighs brushing hers as he led them around the room. She felt very light and free, and when he lifted their hands, and pushed her ribs to spin her underneath, her feet obeyed and she floated back into his arms. Her jaw opened and she burst out a laugh when he lifted a brow at her.

Miss Truesdale was quite pleased with her performance, but reminded her that ballroom dancing was no laughing matter. The ex-ballerina had Draco lead her through several other dance forms Hermione had been working on over the weeks. And Draco was right. It was infinitely easier with a partner.

The music played for the French Waltz. Her eyes snapped to him, and the corner of his mouth tilted upward. He bowed to her, and she responded with a curtsey. He reached for her, and she moved into his arms, beginning the dance she knew so well. For the first time, as his partner.

After twisting about the room with Draco, she couldn't help but think of how light his hand was on her ribs compared to Viktor's firm grip. How Viktor would need to stare at his feet for the third formation, but Draco keep his eyes on her.

She separated from him, moving to dance with the imaginary man two couples away. The place Draco had always been.

She faced the mirror on the side wall of the dance studio, and saw her hair was falling out of its ponytail, her face was flushed, and she had a silly grin on her face. Over her reflection's shoulder, she watched as Draco bowed. He rose, spine straight like always, and the mirror in front of him showed her his face as he caught her eyes. She felt the silly grin spreading as she dipped into a curtsey.

He brought his right hand up, palm facing his reflection and his imaginary partner. She brought hers up, like she had twice before when it was him in front of her. His eyes sparkled at her reflection in the mirror, and as he stepped forward to spin around, she watched a thousand different Dracos and Hermiones dance around each other in the bouncing reflections.

She thought of how terrified she felt when she had spun to him at the Yule Ball. How she waited for him to spit venom at her, and he had only bowed, watching her closely. She had felt out of breath as she brought her hand to his, keeping their skin from connecting, afraid he would snap at her, reel back and wipe his hand on his pant leg.

She turned around herself and caught his eyes across the room, and laughed.

"Miss Granger. Keep focused on your new partner."

This made her laugh harder. Draco smiled at her, biting his cheek.

"You must give your full attention to the new partner you meet," Miss Truesdale called. Hermione finished the circle and faced the mirror again, watching Draco's reflection. "The

new partner in the French Waltz signifies the end of our youthful escapades." Hermione bit her tongue to keep from commenting on the *significance* of ballroom dancing. She turned and moved back to Draco, meeting again in the center of the room. Miss Truesdale continued, narrating their movements.

"And in returning to your original partner" – she faced Draco again – "it signifies that you have forsaken all others," – Hermione watched as Draco lifted his hand chest-level again, waiting – "and you have chosen your partner for life."

She blinked up at him. He swallowed. She lifted her hand, bringing it palm-to-palm with him, and just before they started the final spin around each other, she pressed her skin to his.

They stepped around each other. His hand was warm, and pressed against hers. She bit her lip, watching his face as they finished.

He bowed. She curtseyed. His eyes were deep and almost blue.

"Adequate, Miss Granger."

Miss Truesdale's voice broke her out of her trance. She shook her head, taking a deep breath, and listened while the woman gave her notes.

Hermione thanked her. She stood stoically while Miss Truesdale suggested a few beginner classes that she taught over the summer to the students while they were out of school. She offered for Hermione to join the twelve-year-old pure-bloods, as that was the level she was currently at. Hermione raised a brow and responded, "I'll consider it."

Hermione waved goodbye to the crocodile-woman. Draco held the door open for her to the lobby, biting back a smile.

As the door swung closed, he said, "For what it's worth, I think you're on level with *fourteen-year-olds.* At *least*."

She sent him a withering glare as she changed her shoes and bundled up again.

"Do you and Monsieur DuBois always meet at that café?"

She looked up at him. "Er… yes, mainly. Why?"

"And you and Madame Bernard have tea at that French restaurant?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Like I said." He reached up and tucked her scarf in. "You've been working too long without a partner."

He lifted a brow and exited into the brisk evening air.

~*~

The next day at the office, Hermione was swamped preparing for the first day of the werewolf trial on Monday. She barely saw Draco once, but there was a cup of coffee waiting for her on her desk when she got in.

On Saturday, she arrived at the café to find Draco already sitting and chatting with Monsieur DuBois, laughing at something the instructor said. She pulled a chair and Monsieur DuBois promptly ignored her for the first ten minutes, then finally began quizzing her on modern architecture.

Sunday morning Draco was there with Madame Bernard, and the older woman thought it was the perfect opportunity for Hermione to test her skills and try to plan an imaginary party at the Manor with Draco. Draco insisted on everything being green and silver, just to piss her off.

On both occasions, he said goodbye immediately after the lesson. He didn't offer to walk her back to Cornerstone, and he didn't show any affection towards her. Not that he could. They were never alone. By Monday morning, she was seriously confused on their relationship status.

He greeted her with coffee at the reception desk that morning. She thanked him, and he walked her the twenty feet to her door, discussing the day ahead. Draco would head to the Ministry early to handle Skeeter so that Hermione and Waterstone could focus on the case.

She took twenty minutes to gather her notes and practice her opening arguments before she started packing up. She should have known to close her door.

"So, your coffee delivery is back on schedule, I see."

She looked up to see Blaise in her doorway, holding a teacup.

"Hello, Blaise. I'm just on my way out."

He watched her quietly as she fumbled around with paperwork. When he didn't leave, she flipped her eyes to him.

"The two of you made up?" he asked, brow lifting. He took a sip of his tea.

She looked over his shoulder for eavesdroppers. "Er, yes, in a way."

"Nothing a little life-or-death, can't cure, eh?"

She looked at him again. There was an edge to his voice and a tightness in his lips.

"Is there something you need, Blaise?"

He sipped from his cup again, emptying it. Then vanished it with a wave and shut the door behind him. She watched as he placed his hands in his pockets and leaned back.

“I need to ask you a question, Granger. One that I posed to him a long time ago.” Blaise watched her carefully, and Hermione felt her brows pulling together. “Is this a game?”

She blinked at him. “A game?”

“A bit of cat-and-mouse? Something to break the rules a bit?” He shrugged at her, and she felt very cold. “Or…are you in it for the long haul?”

She opened her mouth to reply and it was like she’d been Confunded.

“Because if you’re not going to see this all the way through,” he said, leveling his eyes on her, “then I beg you…. Back the fuck off.”

She felt like she’d been slapped. She hadn’t seen Blaise’s eyes like this since Hogwarts. Since bullying in the corridors. Even then, there was teasing joy. But now, she was being chastised. And it was completely unnecessary.

She felt the anger rise in her, about to tell him to mind his business and get the hell out of her office when he spoke again, quieter.

“Please,” he said. His eyes softened. “He won’t survive this.”

Hermione felt her anger slip away. She locked eyes with Blaise, and nodded.

“I appreciate your concern for him,” she said. She cleared her throat and looked at her carpets. “But I do love him.” She felt her heart thundering. “I have for a long time.”

She waited. Waited for Blaise to laugh at her, or cheer in his victory at getting her to open up to him.

“But have you changed your mind about a future with him?”

She looked up at him. “Changed my mind?” There was no smugness on his face. Just curiosity.

“Still no dinner dates,” Blaise said. “No going public with him.”

Hermione started to sputter. “I… That’s been his decision as much as mine—“

“Oh, come off it Granger.” He rolled his eyes and she widened hers. “Like you haven’t been setting the rules for this since the beginning.”

“What?!” If that wasn’t the *exact* opposite from how *she* felt about this whole thing…

“If you’ve changed your mind, you need to tell him,” he said. “He’s been taking what he can get.”

“Changed my mind about what?!” Hermione’s voice was rising, but Blaise stayed very neutral as he spoke next.

“You said you wouldn’t marry him.”

She felt her skin prick, and her blood chill, and her eyes drilled into him.

She had. She’d said it to Narcissa when she’d left Azkaban. She had needed her to stop pushing. She’d needed to end Narcissa’s delusions at the time.

And Narcissa had told Draco?

And he still believed it?

She stared at Blaise Zabini, the only person close to Draco who’d been allowed inside his mind.

A knock at her door.

“Granger?” Draco’s voice “Ready?”

She jumped. “Yes, yes. Come in.”

Draco opened the door, eyeing Blaise, and Hermione quickly grabbed her paperwork, sliding past both Slytherins as she headed for the lifts, her head a mess.

~*~

Draco, Cornelia Waterstone, and Hermione stood in the lifts in the Ministry, taking them down, down, to the Wizengamot.

Waterstone was chattering the entire time. She had done her research on each member of the Wizengamot, noting where they stood on issues in the past. She was very confident going into this trial.

They stood in the long stone hallways for twenty minutes or so, Waterstone mentioning Wizengamot members who might appreciate more eye-contact than others, and Hermione stood still, taking it all in.

“Cornelia,” Draco said. “You know what would be most helpful right now?” She heard his voice take on that soothing coo that he used when he was about to manipulate someone into thinking they had a bright idea. “I think it would put everyone at ease to know when they’ll be beginning.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Waterstone said. “I’ll head up, and see if I can’t watch the Wizengamot as they arrive, shall I?”

“Thank you. What a splendid idea.”

Waterstone nodded and walked down the hall back to the lift. Once she’d disappeared, Hermione tried to focus her mind.

“Anxious?” Draco said.

She chuckled. Of all the things in her life, the Wizengamot was giving her the least anxiety.

She looked up at him. He leaned against the wall across from her, just as he had all those months ago, at Dolohov’s trial. The day this mess began. Before Love Contracts and lists and Walls.

She stared down at the stones between them, like a battle line not to cross.

Draco thought she didn’t want to marry him.

He’s been taking what he can get.

Wasn’t that precisely what she had told Ginny last week?

And what had Ginny said.

You’ll never know until you ask for it.

She looked up at him. He stared at the wall next to her feet. Waiting for something.

Waiting.

“I want to be with you.” The words tumbled past her lips and landed on the stones between them. She watched him blink at the wall. She swallowed, pushing her heart back down from where it had caught in her throat. “I want to date you. In public. Not just lunch in your office.” She checked in with him and he was still fixed on the point where the ground met the wall, eyes glazing. “I want to come out as a couple to M.C.G., and figure out what to do about the Love Contract and dating policies…”

She shook her head, trying to clear her rambling thoughts.

“I want to go to dinner with you, and be photographed in the *Prophet*. And hold hands on the way to the Apparition point.” Her heart was pounding and she could feel the rhythm in her fingertips. “I want to spend the night again – every night. I want to have weekly meals with your mother, and let Mippy make me pumpkin soup, and spend *hours* in that library –“

Her voice cracked, and the corner of his shoulder that she’d locked her eyes on started to blur. She thought of how badly she wanted that library and him in it. And how easy it could be to have it…

“I want to be your wife.” She heaved a breath, words spinning off her tongue. “And see you in the mornings, and marry you in the gazebo and – and rule the fucking *world* with you.”

She couldn’t look at him. He hadn’t moved a muscle.

“And I don’t know where the wires got crossed along the way, I don’t know how things got so twisted. But that’s all I’ve ever wanted.” She slapped a tear away from her cheek and sniffed.

“When you ask me why I’ve done the things I have, I want to be able to say it’s because I love you.” She gasped as it came out of her. “That everything has been for you. It’s never been about the ‘right thing to do.’” She laughed, a manic sound that couldn’t be pulled back in. “It’s because I love you.

“And I want to know you. I want to know everything about you. And I understand that I have to ask, but I want to be able to ask. I want you to tell me things when I ask,” she said, stomping her foot. She felt like she’d continue this nonsense until he stopped her. “But if there’s something you can’t tell me, not right now, then maybe there’s a – a hand signal or something. Like you pull your ear—“

Finally, Draco stepped off the wall. She sucked in air, waiting for him. He turned to face her, and his cheeks were pink, his eyes were gliding over her face. He stepped toward her, crossing the invisible line between them.

“Ask,” he whispered. “Ask me now.”

She watched him get closer as she pulled air into her lungs. A million questions flying through her mind, but there was still the first question. The one she still hadn’t heard him answer.

“Why didn’t you identify me that night. At Malfoy Manor.”

He took the final step into her, and she tilted her head back to see his face. He looked into her eyes, and small smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

“It was the right thing to do.”

She blinked, drinking in his smirk, the heat in his eyes, and felt another tear fall. A small laugh bubbled up from her chest, breaking her into a thousand pieces. She gasped in air, and she felt her face crumple. She couldn’t decide if she was laughing or crying, but with this man, it was safe to assume both.

She closed her eyes, pressure pinching behind her lids, and her lips pressing together, and leaned her head back against the wall.

“God, I hate you.” She laughed again, feeling the hot air hit his face.

“I love you, too, Granger.”

And he pressed his lips on hers. She squeezed her eyes tight and felt the tears running away. She threw her arms around his shoulders and he slipped his hands to the curve of her spine.

She pulled back, the past five minutes hitting her in the face. “I’m sorry. That was probably a lot.” She opened her eyes and he was still there in front of her. “The… marriage thing and staying every night –“

“Oh, I don’t know.” He shrugged, and she felt it in his arms. “I think the gazebo is available this weekend.” He raised a brow at her and she laughed, slapping at his chest.

The sound of the lifts arriving. Waterstone was back. Draco pressed his lips against her one last time, and slipped out of her arms as the gates opened.

She smiled at him as Waterstone announced that it was time.

The oak doors opened, and the small, toady man appeared. The same one from all those months ago. She gave him her wand and looked back at Draco. He smiled softly at her.

She knew her face was mess, her eyes were still leaking, and her hands were shaking from the emotional whiplash, but Draco smiled at her.

And it was time to save the fucking werewolves.

~*~

The Wizengamot was even less excited to see her than normal. The redheaded woman that she loathed took lead on the examination of their case, and seemed to be purposefully prodding at Hermione throughout. The blonde woman who reminded her of Molly Weasley tried to smile encouragingly, but it was clear from the faces in the courtroom that they steeled themselves in preparation for this day.

The day Hermione Granger took on the Wizengamot.

After her opening statements were delivered and the Wizengamot had the opportunity to ask questions, court was dismissed after only two hours to allow the members the rest of the afternoon to review the paperwork and statistics Hermione provided.

Which was wonderful, because that meant Draco could take her out to lunch.

They ended up in a Muggle restaurant, and after forty-five minutes of Hermione yammering about how amazing she did in the courtroom, and forty-five minutes of Draco watching her with a small grin, she finally stopped and said, “And how’s your sandwich?”

Draco smiled. “You know Granger, I’m not sure I like this concept of dating. Why take you out and pay for your meal here when I can listen to you ramble about yourself for hours at the office.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Maybe I’m paying.”

“You can try,” he warned.

~*~

The trial continued for the rest of the week. Harry came in on Tuesday to testify on behalf of Remus Lupin and his legacy. Every evening Draco took Hermione to dinner. They had yet to

figure out what to do about the Love Contract and office dynamic, so they stuck with Muggle restaurants where they would be less likely to be recognized.

He walked her to the nearest Apparition point at the end of the every night, and he held her hand and kissed her goodbye. They didn't pick up the lunch time trysts, and Hermione didn't know if that was due to her being in trial for the Wizengamot, or if he was actually taking it slow.

On Tuesday evening, he came with her to Madame Michele's lesson and sat through tea with them. On Wednesday night, she asked him if he wanted to come home with her.

His eyes flashed, and he bit his lip. "As much as I want to," he said, "I can't. There's something I need to get back to at the office tonight." He looked quite put out.

"Is it anything you need help with?" she asked.

He blinked at her, and paused before saying, "Not yet. But possibly soon."

~*~

On Friday, the Wizengamot voted. Forty-seven out of fifty members voted to implement the new werewolf laws, allowing equal rights for werewolves and adjusting the existing legislation.

She was positive the redhead was one of the three votes against, and she made sure to get her name and title so she could send her a rotten fruit basket next week.

She and Draco returned to the office, and he held her hand as they stepped into the lifts to take them back up to Malfoy Consulting.

"I have a surprise for you."

She looked up at him, and he was staring at his feet.

"A good surprise?" she laughed.

"Mmhmm." He nodded. The lift doors closed. "I was shocked to hear it was ready today." He looked at her. "So, I wanted you to have it now, in honor of your triumph in the Wizengamot today." He grinned at her. Nervously.

She blinked at him. A gift? Not a book or a sweater or parchment and quills. Something that needed to be made? Or worked on? She couldn't think of anything she wanted that needed to be made. Perhaps he'd gotten her parchment and quills with her initials engraved.

"I – thank you. I'm… quite speechless really." Her curiosity began working immediately. "It's something you had made?"

"No," he said, looking at the lift doors. "Fixed, really."

She frowned. “Fixed? Have I broken something?” She laughed, and he grinned.

“You’ll know what it is in just thirty seconds, woman. Can’t you wait?”

She stared at the lift doors. A surprise for her. From him.

The lift slowed, and he squeezed her hand before releasing it, his fingers drifting away from her.

“I have senior staff and associates in the conference room this afternoon for the March staff meeting. I’ll let them know of your success today.” The doors opened. “You’re excused for the rest of the afternoon, Granger.”

He started to exit. She jumped.

“What? Why? What?” She stepped out of the lifts. “Is *that* my surprise? You must not know me at all, Malfoy, if you think I enjoy days off—“

“Go!” He whipped around, exasperated. “Go to your office, enjoy your surprise, and I’ll see you sometime tomorrow.”

He stalked away from her. Tense. He was nervous. She looked around the floor, finding several people heading into the conference room. She wasn’t invited to the meeting?

Hermione shook her head and walked to her office. She opened the door slowly, expecting balloons to drop or fireworks or something dangerous.

A man sat behind her desk, and a woman in her guest chair. The man stood.

“Miss Granger.” He smiled. He was the man she’d seen Draco with at the Valentine’s Day gala. The one he’d met with at the office a few weeks ago.

Hermione blinked, about to ask who they were when the woman turned toward her, and Hermione was staring at the face of her mother.

She felt her lungs tighten, pulling in on themselves. She felt her skin buzz. She stared at her mother’s face –

No. Monica Wilkins. This woman didn’t know her. Hermione could see it on her face as she frowned at her.

Hermione’s mouth was open, so she closed it. “Hello, how can I help you?” she croaked.

“Hermione?” A voice from her bookshelves. Her father was standing there. She hadn’t noticed him. And he’d called her Hermione…

“Yes, that’s me.” She could feel her heart drumming. She couldn’t be sure. She couldn’t hope –

Her mother stood, and her eyes were drawn back to her. She missed the way she moved.

“Your hair is different.”

Hermione reached up and touched her hair, sleeked into large curls for court today. She remembered.

Monica Wilkins remembered a before.

“Mum?” Hermione’s vision blurred. She felt her lips tremble and she pressed them together.

Her father moved toward her as her mother nodded. She crossed her arms, holding herself together. A tear tumbled down her face as her father touched her shoulder.

There was still a strange look on her mother’s face, but her father hugged her, and she felt her chest break into fragments. When he released her, she turned to the man behind her desk.

“Who are you? What’s happened? Are they cured?”

He smiled gently at her. “My name is Dr. Flanders. I’m a memory charm expert. Also, in the Muggle world I’m a psychologist. Your parents are on the *road* to recovery. The next step in the process involves you. Meeting you. Spending time with you.”

“Step in the process?” She frowned at him. “How long have you been working with them?” She couldn’t ignore her mother’s eyes on her.

“About two weeks now,” he said. “You three should talk. Ask each other questions. I’ll remain a quiet observer in case things become too mentally taxing for them.”

Hermione stared at him. Then her mother moved toward her.

“I’m… slower to the process, unfortunately,” her mother said, and Hermione felt another tear fall. “But I do recognize you. Hermione.” She touched her face. “And I know you are mine.”

Hermione nodded, an empty feeling tearing through her at the idea that her mother needed convincing. She would need to move slowly.

“Tell me how this is working. What do you know already?” she asked.

“Well,” her father started. “Dr. Flanders started with our earliest memories. I mean to say, that I remember you quite vividly as a child.”

Her mother nodded.

“And then having that boy tell us about you as teenager,” her father said. “That was helpful.”

“Yes, there were gaps, but Dr. Flanders explained that you were at a boarding school.”

“Magic school. Remember, dear? We heard about the magic?”

“Yes, that’s right. The magic is newer to me,” her mother said, closing her eyes. “But then just two days ago, the boy let us… what is it? Watch a memory?”

“Yes,” her father said. “That’s it. We swam into a… thing and watched a few of his memories of you from school. Harold didn’t like that boy much, did he?”

“Harry, dear. Her friend’s name is Harry.”

Hermione blinked, feeling her heart crying out. “What boy?”

~*~

The floor was dead as she excused herself from her office for a moment. Just a few of the interns and secretaries gossiping in a corner, jumping apart in surprise when they saw her.

Her heels clicked on the way to the conference room. The door swung open for her, and all eyes turned to her as she marched in. Cuthbert Mockridge was standing, giving his report on his department. The senior staff sat in their places around the table and the associates lining the walls, except for Walter who sat in her place at the table.

“Miss Granger,” Mockridge said in greeting. “As I was saying…”

Hermione locked eyes on the man at the end of the table. “The boy” as her parents called him. His eyes wary and tense as he watched her walk around the table, heading straight for him.

Mockridge continued his speech. Blaise moved out of her way. And Draco looked like he was prepared to be hit. Her hand shot out and grabbed his collar, bringing her lips onto his.

She heard whistling, sputtering, gasping, but she kissed him. His fingers wound up into her hair, and she smiled against his lips.

She pulled back and looked up. Mockridge was squinting at them, and a few of the male associates looked taken aback. But the women were giggling, including Mockridge’s associate who knew Draco’s coffee routine. Blaise was grinning like a loon, and even Dorothea had a small smirk on her face.

“Hello, yes. Hi.” She sputtered. She gestured between herself and Draco. “Draco Malfoy and I are dating. We, uh… Yes. We’re dating. Boyfriend and girlfriend.” She nodded at the table. “So we’ll need to take a look at that… er, Love Contract business. And just… abolish that, I say.”

She shrugged. Blaise gave a “Here! Here!”

“Because… because I love him.” She looked at Draco. He was blushing, and trying to fight the smile creeping onto his face. “And he loves me – I think –“

“I do, yes.” He grinned at the conference table.

“So. That’s that! I’ll, uh, let you all get back to it.” She waved her hand at Mockridge. “Continue on. I’ll be heading to dinner with my parents now.”

She nodded at them all, ignoring Blaise's giggling, and left the room.

She heard applause following her. And smiled.

~*~

At dinner with her parents, they kept with very easy questions and stories. She asked them about Australia and their life there. They asked her about her current life, instead of the past they couldn't remember. Her mother didn't take her eyes off of her the entire evening.

They were set up at a hotel nearby, so Hermione walked them back and hugged them goodbye in the lobby. They would have lunch tomorrow on her break from Cornerstone.

She Apparated home, climbed the stairs to her and Ginny's apartment, and opened the door to find Draco, Harry, and Ginny visiting around the small dining room table. Before she could process Draco in her living space, Ginny had launched herself at her.

"You won! You WON!" She tightened her arms around Hermione's ribs. She pulled back. "And your parents! Your PARENTS!"

"Er, yes. Both." She looked past the ginger curls to Draco. "Draco told you?"

"Yes, Harry and I will have a session with them tomorrow."

"A session?"

Draco stepped forward. "Dr. Flanders thinks it may help if your parents saw memories of them interacting with you. From an outside observer."

"Like in Diagon Alley, buying books with Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

Hermione nodded, still quite overwhelmed by it all. She was desperate to pick Dr. Flanders' brain about how this all worked.

Ginny looked back and forth between Hermione and Draco in the silence.

"Er, Harry and I are just going to… go somewhere… for a while. Days maybe."

She grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him past Hermione. She grinned at Ginny, and just before the door closed on them, she heard Harry say, "But I made dinner."

She looked at Draco, standing with his hands in his pockets in the middle of her living room.

"Don't I pay you, Granger?" He looked around the small flat. "Surely with Weasley's Quidditch salary and your measly income, you can afford an upgrade."

She glared at him. "I like this apartment. Besides, I'm barely in it."

He smirked at her and stepped closer. "You outed us to the entire office today."

She winced. “I did. I really did, didn’t I?” She pressed her lips together as he stepped closer again, sliding his arms around her waist. “Was there a discussion of what to do with the Love Contract, or will you need to resign.”

He smiled as he kissed her. She brought her hands up to his arms, holding him to her. She pulled back.

“Did you really show my parents your memories?”

He looked away. “A few. Just about everyone has seen into my mind now, so I thought, what’s the difference?”

She smiled as he lowered his lips to her neck, sucking on his favorite spot. Her pulse sped, and her body began to sing.

“Which memories?” she breathed.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” His breath ghosted across her neck.

“Thank you, Draco.” She ran her hands up his shoulders and into his hair. “Thank you for bringing them back to me.”

“Of course.” He pulled her closer to him and whispered, “It was the right thing to do.”

She slapped his shoulder, and he laughed. A sound that made itself quite at home.

~*~

“HERMIONE GRANGER AND DRACO MALFOY IN LOVE!!”
by Rita Skeeter

A love story for the ages. A romance against all odds.

Yes, that’s right, fair readers. Hermione Granger has hooked herself a Malfoy. And Draco Malfoy must be doing something right, himself.

The couple was seen just last week at dinner with a couple that could only be Miss Granger’s parents. After saying goodnight, Granger and Malfoy were seen holding hands and canoodling on the way home.

The two have been spotted several other times throughout the week, even on a double-date with Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. Will there be a race to the altar?

When asked for comment on their new relationship, Draco Malfoy responded, “She’s a very important person to me. We’re very serious about each other.”

Hermione Granger declined to comment. Quite rudely.

Of course, you know me, readers. I have such a voracity for knowledge! I reached out to Narcissa Malfoy for comment.

"Hermione has long felt like a daughter to me. I couldn't be more supportive."

Well, from one friend to another, I must tell you. I think it is safe to say that Draco Malfoy is finally off the market.

We at the Daily Prophet *wish him the best of luck with his Golden Girl.*

~*~

Two Years Later

She stepped through the fireplace right on schedule. The guard took her wand, read her the rules, and searched for weapons on her.

She followed a younger guard through the maze until she was brought before a familiar stone door. The guard stood to the side, and Hermione pushed open the door.

He sat at the metal table. Hair pulled back, hands folded. He looked the exact same as he had in the hospital, only two years older.

"Miss Granger." He grinned. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Lucius." She nodded. "It's Mrs. Malfoy, now."

She walked to the metal chair in front of him and sat. She crossed her legs and leaned back.

"Yes," he grinned. "I was quite taken with the photographs from the *Prophet*. Miss Parkinson's first wedding gown design, was it not?"

"It was. She has several more offers now." Hermione lifted a brow. "It was a beautiful day. Perfect. And you were right about the gardens. The gazebo was the perfect location for the ceremony. Reception in the ballroom."

She clasped her hands together on the table, matching his pose, and managed to flash the Malfoy family diamond at him.

His eyes flickered down to it. He smirked and looked back up at her.

"What is it you are really here for, Mrs. Malfoy."

She grinned tightly. "I hear that you are headed to trial next year to negotiate your sentence down. What with your good behavior and the unfortunate incident of your stabbing two years ago, I have it on good authority that you might stand a chance of getting out of here in five years."

He watched her carefully. “Well, that’s good to hear.”

She sat very still, just like Draco taught her. “I may be enticed to testify on your behalf. Perhaps even get your ex-wife and son to do the same.”

His eyes glittered at her before returning to dead grey orbs. “What is it you want in return.”

Hermione pulled a slip of paper from her pocket, and slid it across the table to him. She watched him frown at it.

“And what’s this?”

“A list,” she said. His eyes flipped up to her. “Of qualities in my child’s grandfather.”

She rested her hand on her belly, and sent him the Malfoy smirk.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for joining me. :)

I will be posting the Draco POV of this story soon. It won't be chapter-for-chapter, so hopefully nothing feels repetitive. Then once the Draco POV is finished, I will start posting the Auction AU story.

If you find yourself re-reading this story, and feel like dropping a "I'd love to see this scene from Draco's POV," that would help me a lot with forming the companion piece. Your favorite scene may not make it into the POV, but it could help me keep in mind how much of an enigma our dear Draco is. :P

Thanks again for a wild ride.

End Notes

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Works inspired by this one

A Dress with Pockets by PacificRimbaud

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!